

1. Who are the historians?

Leopold Von Ranke

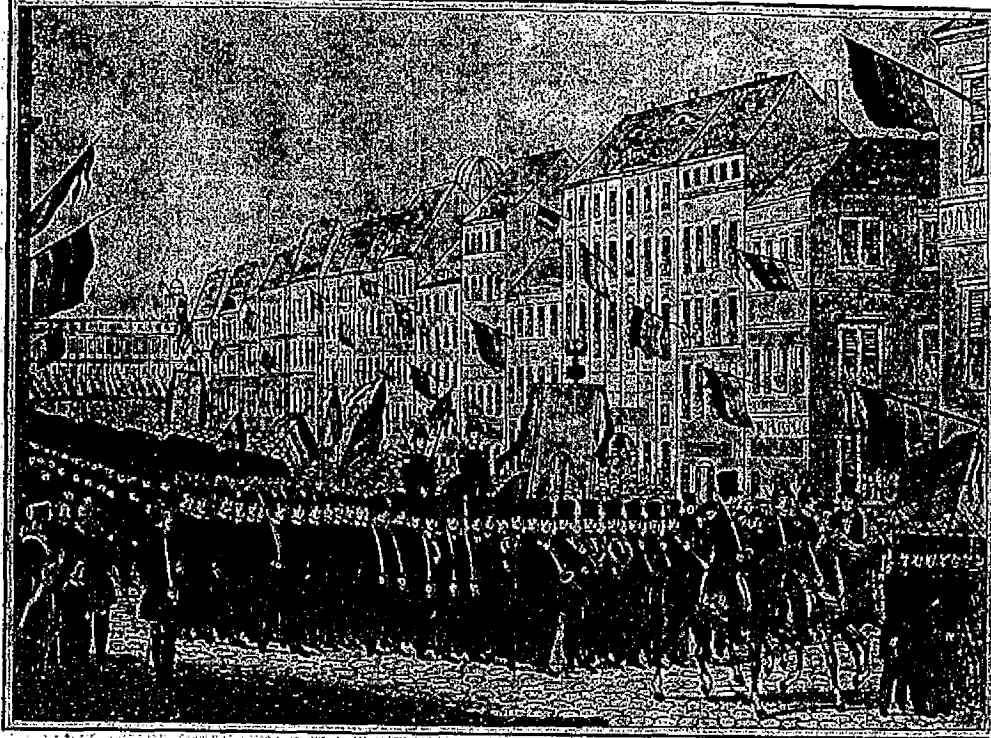


- ☛ born: in Thuringia in Germany 1795; eldest child of a small-town lawyer and descendant of long line of evangelical pastors
- ☛ Education: Lutheran piety and classical languages. Studied at University of Leipzig
- ☛ Initially worked as a teacher of classical literature at a Gymnasium in Prussia, this experience pushed him in the direction of history as a career. Published first book in 1824 - *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, 1494-1535* and then the *History of the Ottoman and Spanish Monarchies in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* in 1827. The success of both works ensured a brilliant academic future.
- ☛ He was offered an extraordinary professorship at The University of Berlin, newly est. in 1810. This university boasted great figures incl. Hegel in Philosophy and Savigny in legal history. Ranke was welcomed by the university intellectual elite.
- ☛ He was also rewarded with generous patronage from the Prussian Government. Next project was funded by the government and Ranke focused in 16th century Italian history, for which he journeyed to Vienna, Florence, Venice and Rome for extensive research through archives. Later wrote *History of the Popes* in 1834-6.
- ☛ More fame followed, wrote political pieces; he was the conservative darling of the Prussian government, appointed Prussian Royal Historiographer in 1841. Ranke enjoyed several other academic and royal honours.

☞ During the 1848 revolution, he wrote academic papers urging the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV to resist liberals in preserving monarchical rule in Prussia. Retired in early 1871, but continued writing. In 1880 at the age of 84, he began a Universal History. Granted a hereditary nobility in 1865; privy councillor in 1882; honorary citizen of Berlin in 1885.

☞ Ranke's is a story of brilliant public and private success – his work is pivotal in the development of historical theory, method, philosophy and process

Historical context and key influences:



☛ Early 19th century - Reaction to Napoleonic occupation in Germany – emergence of a strong sense of Germanic nationalism amongst intellectuals, political and military elites. New emphasis on the *Volk* as cultural identity.

☛ 1800s saw a monumental intellectual shift in the German-speaking territories east of the Rhine: a shift away from the Enlightenment and Liberalism.

Gradual independence of German intellectuals, artists and poets ie. separate from imitating French achievements and culture. Eg. Goethe, Kant, Herder, Schiller, Hegel, Beethoven, Schubert. Some works ran parallel with Enlightenment, but central character of German intellectuals ran counter ie. not a 'frontal opposition' but to be understood as 'distinct' - "Counter-Enlightenment".

☛ Eg. German philosophy and historical writing was more 'concrete' – reflects importance of *epistemology* ie. the truth-claims about the past required testing and validation. Philosophers such as Hegel, Kant etc had a profound influence on German historiography through to 1914. Enlightenment history was 'philosophical', had a moral function/ teaching by example, rather 'idealist'.

☞ Influence came from the development of key institutions at this time – eg. University of Gottingen and University of Berlin. Humbolt worked to engage not only the jurist Savigny, but also Niebuhr and later Mommsen – both Roman historians, the archivist Carl August Friedrich Pertz who worked on a vast project “*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*” a scholarly edition of sources made available to historians, and significantly Leopold von Ranke

☞ *Ranke and his pupils saw a distinct progress in German history from the end of Napoleonic rule to the 1871 and the emergence of German federalism “Out of the Wars of Liberation arose the myth of the Spirit of 1813 cultivated by Prussian-oriented historians...and central to the belief of the German historicist tradition. ...the Prussian monarchy marked a high point in the history of human freedom... (which) contrasted sharply with the atomistic view of society supposedly inherent in the ideas of 1789”*

☞ ‘Romanticism’: early 1800s a time of intense re-thinking of the recent past in France, Britain and in America (revolutions and war). ‘Romantic historiography’ – a reaction to the cold and clinical perspectives associated with rationalism; attempt to create history that was alive and creative, and not value-free. Rigorous enquiry was important but rich narrative explanations were more so. Emphasis on persons and unique events. Macauley, Carlyle and Michelet recognised that if the language was conversational, then the message was more likely to be disseminated. The art of narration and chronological order was paramount. Etc etc.

☞ Romantic historiography influenced Ranke. There was romance in rediscovering the *Volk* and creating a *Fatherland*. He believed that the Prussia of his day embodied a just and stable society. He was happy about the slowing down and loss of ‘revolutionary’ (liberal) ideas. But generally speaking, German historiography of the 19th century rejected Romanticism - sought ‘form’ from the ‘chaos’ of narration; events would include their own morality (ie. not imposed from above); events would not make sense through the application of a theory, but only by an analysis of the actual event.

☞ Development of ‘classificatory science’, new ‘scientific’ language spread within the western intelligentsia. Scientific approach to documentation

☛ Lutheranism - Ranke is usually regarded as separating history from philosophy, theology and literature from non-rational pursuits such as mysticism. But, his earlier writings make it clear that the business of history was to see to understand God's presence in the world – the idea that in the past, in antiquity, it is possible to find God the 'indwelling spirit'. 'Those who probe history will deepen their judgement and find God at the same time', God is to be found in the great interactions of history.

What are the aims and purposes of history?

☛ Ranke argued for a new kind of historical writing: sober, plainly presented, not necessarily pleasant to read (the accumulation of detail can be tiring to read), not necessarily unified in a narrative (the historian is not free to make the connections as in a narrative structure). Ranke's focus is on the event, but sees the importance in exploring the longer processes of change that shape the event.

☛ Ranke in the intro. to his *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* argues that the historian will always have a purpose that depends on his point of view. Think of the title of his book – in this case it is about the importance of race – the unity of the Latin and Germanic (racially kindred) peoples compared with the others who are excluded and irrelevant in history (Armenians, Turks, Slavs, Lithuanians, Magyars etc).

The focus is on a 'small portion' of the history of the Latin and German nation at the beginning of the modern age (late 15th-early 16th centuries. Central events - 'founding' of the Spanish monarchy', 'discovery of America, conquest of Empires', 'religious opposition in the Reformation', 'conflict between Spain, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands' etc. 'modern' history is seen as the story of conflict between various nations and forces within the Latin and Germanic nations – conflict and unity.

☛ Ranke's history is a story of development, of success in history: a 'progressive development of the Latin and Teutonic life from the first beginning to now':

Narrative of progress. eg. story of internal unity, of external repulsion and conquest, against the Arabs, Hungarians and Slavs, Christianisation – 'crusades' in Middle East, but also Spain, north Africa, Scandinavia, Baltic.

☛ In this famous intro. Ranke argues that he is not judging the process, that he is only describing, only seeking to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). But is he really successful in avoiding judging the past? Is he really able to avoid presentism? (ie. judgment of the past driven by one's own contemporary debates etc). He has already flagged that he is writing racial history, he deliberately leaves out non-Latin and non-Germanic peoples, these do not belong to Europe's essential history. He also argues that he is not 'instructing the present for the benefit

of future ages', and ends the intro. By invoking God – 'the life of the individual, of generations, of nations...has the hand of God above them'

☛ The origins of history teaching today originated in Ranke's teaching style at The University of Berlin - he instituted the historical seminar in 1833, encouraged the critical inspection of original documents and the narratives of eyewitnesses. This made the training of young professional historians possible – pass on knowledge and technique from generation to generation. Research and teaching, seminar was a good way for scholars to keep each other on track etc. Other aspects were not as influential eg. 'every epoch is immediate to God', ie. the historian should investigate each age for itself, it is unique to itself and should not be seen as a precursor to the present; the historian should not moralise on the past from political contemporary political or personal standpoints; historians should extinguish their own presence because it was not in the past. He also tried to establish that history should be political, military and diplomatic history – the focus should be on the interaction between states, mixed with focus on actions of individual figures

☛ Ranke's approach to writing history was 'empirical'. Empiricism had origins in late 16th-17th century – belief that knowledge could be derived from observation, experimentation and investigation of the material world. Empiricism is a doctrine of epistemology – 'what do we know, and how do we know it?'. 'How do you know that?'. Empirical methodology was applied to the study of the past, esp. from the 1800s onwards (even to the present), and Ranke is associated with its professional application in Germany. Empirical approach to the past – although the past is no longer with us and cannot be experienced directly, human existence and action in the past has left physical traces or marks which have survived into the present -- 'sources'. The study of these remains can lead us to knowledge about the past. Any 'truth statement' has to be supported by references to a source if challenged. Ie. No room for intuition or imagination. The practise of citation was encouraged by Ranke – ie. footnoting authorities.

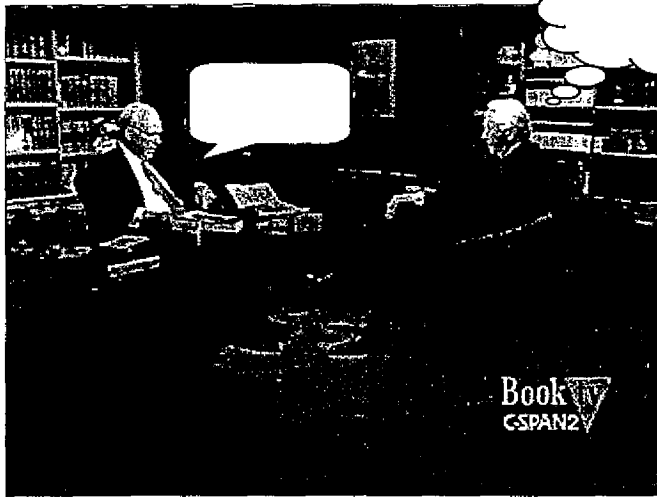
☛ Empiricism : 1. rigorous examination and knowledge of historical evidence, verified by references 2. impartial research; devoid of pre-existing beliefs 3. inductive reasoning – ie. from the particular to the general.

☞ Eg. Profoundly influenced by Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Quentin Durward* (Romantic historical-literature). Set in 15th century France, the narrative concerns the adventures of a Scottish gentleman, Catholic, young, carefree and clever. The novel 'offended' Ranke – the historical portraits seemed to contradict historical evidence – totally unhistorical to Ranke (think of today's critiques of history and film). “

historical sources themselves were more beautiful and in any case more interesting than romantic fiction. I turned completely away from such fiction and resolved to avoid any invention and imagination in my work and to keep strictly the facts.”

☞ Emphasis therefore on sorting facts from 'primary' and 'secondary' sources. Ranke advocated a specialist reading and analysing of sources – putting them to the test by asking such critical questions as: aim or purpose, audience, context, nature/aims/purpose of the author.

What are the historical debates?



- ☛ Ranke was idiosyncratic, inconsistent and contradictory. A usual question in historiography courses is 'was Ranke really a rankean?'
- ☛ Was Ranke really able to 'tell it like it was'? His work inevitably entailed judgement – Lutheran, conservative; involvement with government;
- ☛ Despite trying to avoid 'historicism' his work is historicist – history is seen as a link between the past and present;
- ☛ Positivist – with empirical data, one can see a causal link between past, present and future. "if man could understand the laws that governed social change in the past, he could understand where the future could bring change".
- ☛ Richard Evans (cf. BOS reading) argues that Ranke's well known phrase (to refrain from judging the past) is misunderstood. He intended that each historical period should be understood on its own terms – ie. should not be judged by the historian's own criteria.
- ☛ Accusations of historicism and positivism have recently been challenged by Fritz Stern in *Varieties of History: from Voltaire to the Present* (1978), argues like Evans that criticisms of Ranke are misguided. That Ranke promoted the need for a universal history, one which transcended nations. Ranke never in fact argues that his interpretation is absolute. In the preface to his history of the Teutonic nations he writes 'to history, has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: I

want only to show what actually happened". – clearly not imposing some grand design on history – it is a renunciation of positivism, anachronism etc.

☛ Georg Iggers writing on historiography also argues that Ranke's intentions are also mis-translated/misunderstood. Ranke merely wanted to show how, essentially things happened. IE, historians must try to offer a factual representation of the past devoid of their views but they must also go beyond the fact and seek the general tendencies or leading ideas which gave an individual or institution its character.

☛ is rankean history 'empirical'?

☛ From the 1820s *professional* historians began to firmly reject any association with literary fantasticality and sought a closer relationship to historical reality. The deliberate distinction between history as art and history as science.

☛ Ranke's emphasis on Germanic progress has been seen to encompass genocide as defined by Rafael Lemkin – the destruction of a life –world of a group or nation or country or territory, followed by the imposition of the life-world of the conquering group (eg. Lemkin in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* compares Nazis colonisation of Poland with Crusades). Genocidal spirit of colonisation.

☛ By the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, historical debate in Britain for instance polarized between the followers of Marx, and the 'empiricist' tradition that ultimately looks back to Ranke and 'positivism'. Elements of 'rankean' history

Key Words:

Empirical methodology: 1. rigorous examination and knowledge of historical evidence, verified by references 2. impartial research; devoid of pre-existing beliefs – *a priori* beliefs 3. inductive reasoning – ie. from the particular to the general.

‘traditional’ vs ‘scientific’

progressive