Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866
Leopold von Ranke: Excerpts from Selected Works (1824-1881)

Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) was one of the most important and prolific German historians of the 19th century. His introduction to *The History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* (1824), his notes on history and philosophy (1881-1888), and an excerpt from his lectures on world history (1854) are reprinted below. Most significantly, Ranke advocated, in contradiction to Hegel's unity of knowledge, the detailed analysis of primary sources and argued that general themes could only emerge from such empirical studies. Ranke valued each historical era on its own terms; he doubted the notion of history as "progress" and attempted to find out "how it really was."

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## I. Introduction to Ranke's *The History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* (1824)

THE PRESENT BOOK, I must confess, appeared more perfect to me before its printing than after. Nevertheless, I rely upon kindly readers who will pay attention less to its deficiencies than to its possible values. So as not to entrust it solely to its own powers, let me begin with a short explanation of its purpose, its material, and its form.

The purpose of an historian depends upon his point of view. About my viewpoint in this volume, two things must be said. First, I regard the Latin and Germanic peoples as a unit. This notion differs from three analogous concepts: the concept of a universal Christendom (which would include even the Armenians); the concept of Europe (for the Turks there are Asiatics, and the Russian empire embraces the whole of northern Asia and cannot be understood without investigating and penetrating a complete range of Asiatic affairs); and, the most analogous concept, the concept of Latin Christianity (for Slavic, Lithuanian, and Magyar races belonging to the latter have their own special and peculiar nature which I shall not include here).

By touching upon what is foreign to this unity only where necessary and only as a passing and subordinate matter, the author will remain close to the racially kindred nations of either purely Germanic or Latin-Germanic origin whose history forms the heart of all modern history.

In the following Introduction I shall try to show—by tracing the threads of international affairs—how these peoples have developed in unison and along similar lines. This is one aspect of the present book. The other is manifest from the contents: that it includes only a small portion of the history of those same nations, which we could call the beginning of the modern age. It contains only histories, not History. It comprises, on the one hand, the founding of the Spanish monarchy

and the collapse of Italian freedom; and, on the other, the formation of a double opposition: political opposition by the French and religious opposition by the Reformation—in short, that division of our nations into hostile camps upon which all modern history is based. It begins at the moment in which Italy was still enjoying at least external freedom, and, if the position of the papacy is taken into consideration, perhaps even a predominance. The narrative then describes the division of Italy, the invasion by the French and Spanish, the destruction of freedom in some states and of self-determination in others, and, finally, the victory of the Spanish and the beginning of their domination. Starting with the political insignificance of the Spanish kingdoms, it proceeds to their unification and to the crusade of the united kingdoms against the infidels and for the inner renewal of Christianity. The book seeks to make clear how this crusade led to the discovery of America and the conquest of its great empires, and how, above all, it led to the Spanish domination of Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. Thirdly, the work proceeds from the moment when Charles VIII went forth as a defender of Christendom against the Turks, through all the fortunes and misfortunes of the French, to the time 41 years later when Francis I called upon those same Turks for aid against the emperor. Finally, by following the beginnings of a political opposition in Germany against the emperor and of a religious opposition in Europe against the pope, it attempts to open the way toward a complete view of the history of the great schism caused by the Reformation. The first phase of that schism itself will be considered. The book seeks to comprehend all these and other related events in the history of the Latin and Germanic nations as a unity. History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume: it seeks only to show what actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].

But from what sources can such a new investigation be made? The basis of the present work, the sources of its material, are memoirs, diaries, letters, ambassadors' reports, and original accounts of eyewitnesses. Other writings were used only if they were immediately derived from such as these, or seemed to be equal to them in some original information. These sources will be noted on every page; the method of investigation and the critical conclusions will be presented in a second volume, to be published concurrently.

Aim and subject shape the form of a book. We cannot expect from the writing of history the same free development as is, at least in theory, to be expected in works of literature; I am not certain that it was right to ascribe this quality to the work of the Greek and Roman masters. A strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive though they may be, is the highest law. A second, for me, is the development of the unity and the progress of the events. Therefore, instead of starting, as might be expected, with a general account of the political situation of Europe, which would have confused if not distracted our attention, I have preferred to discuss in detail each people, each power, and each individual only at the time when each played an importantly active or leading role. I have not been disturbed by the fact that here and there they have had to be mentioned earlier where their existence could not be ignored. But thereby we are better able to grasp the general line of their development, the paths which they followed, and the ideas by which they were motivated.

Finally, what will be said of my treatment of particulars, the essential part of the writing of history? Will it not often seem harsh, disconnected, colorless, and tiring? There exist noble models for this work, ancient and—we should not forget—modern as well. I have not tried to emulate them; theirs was another world. There is an exalted ideal toward which we can reach: the event itself in its human intelligibility, its unity, its diversity. I know how far from it I have remained. One tries, one strives, but in the end it is not attained. Let none be impatient with this! The important thing, as Jacobi says, is always how we deal with humanity as it is, explicable or inexplicable; the life of the individual, of generations, of nations; and, at times, with the hand of God above them.

Source of English translation: Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, edited and translated by Roger Wines. New York: Fordham University Press, 1981, pp. 56-59.



II. Notes on history and philosophy, excerpt from Ranke's *World History* (1881-88)

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IT HAS OFTEN BEEN NOTED that there is a certain contradiction between immature philosophy and history. Some thinkers have decided on a priori grounds what must be. Without observing that others, more doubting, will disagree with their ideas, they set forth to rediscover them in the history of the world. Out of the infinite array of facts, they select those which they wish to believe. This has been called the philosophy of history! One of the ideas which is continually repeated in the philosophies of history is the irrefutable proposition that mankind is involved in an uninterrupted progress, a steady development of its own perfection. Fichte, one of the first philosophers of this type, assumed that there are five epochs of what he called a world plan: the rule of reason through instinct, the rule of reason through law, the liberation from the authority of reason, the science of reason, and the art of reason. Or, put otherwise: innocence, original sinfulness, complete sinfulness, initial justification, and completed justification. These stages can also appear in the life of an individual. If this or similar schemes were somehow true, then universal history would have to follow a progression, and the human race would travel in its appointed course from one age to another. History would be completely concerned with the development of such concepts, with their manifestations and representations in the world. But this is largely not so. For one thing, philosophers themselves are extraordinarily at odds about the type and selection of these dominating ideas. Moreover, they consider only a few of the peoples in the world's history, regarding the activity of the rest as

nothing, merely superfluous. Nor can they disguise the fact that from the beginning of the world to the present day the peoples of the world have experienced the most varied circumstances.

There are two ways to become acquainted with human affairs: through the knowledge of the particular, and through the knowledge of the abstract. There is no other method. Even revelation consists of the two: abstract principles and history. But these two sources of knowledge must be distinguished. Those historians who disregard this err, as do those who see history as only a vast aggregation of facts which must be arranged according to a utilitarian principle to make them comprehensible. Thus they append one particular fact to another, connected only by a general moral. I believe, instead, that the science of history is called upon to find its perfection within itself, and that it is capable of doing so. By proceeding from the research and consideration of the individual facts in themselves to a general view of events, history is able to raise itself to a knowledge of the objectively present relationships.

To make a true historian, I think that two qualities are needed, the first of which is a participation and joy in the particular in and for itself. If a person has a real fondness for this race of so many, so varied, creatures to which we ourselves belong, and for its essential nature, always ancient and somehow always new, so good and so evil, so noble and so brutish, so refined and so crude, directed toward eternity and living for the moment, satisfied with little yet desirous of everything; if he has a love of the vital manifestation of humanity at all, then he must rejoice in it without any reference to the progress of things. To his observation of humanity's virtues he will add an attention to its accompanying vices, to its happiness and misfortunes, to the development of human nature under so many varied conditions, to its institutions and customs. In summary, he must seek to follow the kings who have ruled over the races, the succession of events, and the development of the chief undertakings. All this he should do for no purpose other than his joy in the life of the particular individual, just as we enjoy flowers without considering to which genus of Linnaeus and Oken they belong. Enough: he must do this without thinking how the whole appears in the individuals.

But this is not enough. It is essential that the historian also have an eye for the universal. He ought not to conceive of it a priori as the philosopher does. Rather, his consideration of particular individuals will show him the course which the development of the world as a whole has taken. This development is related, not to the universal ideas which have ruled in one or another period, but to something completely different. No people in the world has remained out of contact with the others. This relationship, inherent in a people's own nature, is the one by which it enters into universal history, and must be emphasized in universal history.

There are some peoples who have armed themselves more powerfully than their neighbors on the planet, and these above all have exercised an influence upon the rest. They were the chief cause of the changes, for good or ill, which the world has experienced. Our attention ought to be directed, not to the ideas which some see as the directing force, but to the peoples themselves who appear as actors in history, to their struggles with one another, to their own development which took place in the midst of these peaceful or warlike relationships. It would be infinitely

wrong to see only the effects of brute force in the struggles of historical powers or to conceive of the past in that way. There appears a spiritual essence in power itself, an original genius which has its own proper life, fulfills more or less its own requirements, and forms its own sphere of action. The business of history is to perceive the existence of this life, which cannot be described by a thought or a word. The spirit which appears in the world is not of such a conceivable nature. It fills all the boundaries of its being with its presence; nothing about it is accidental; its manifestation is founded in everything.

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Source of English translation: Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, edited and translated by Roger Wines. New York: Fordham University Press, 1981, pp. 101-4.



III. Excerpt from Ranke's lectures on world history (1854)

THE OBJECT OF THE PRESENT LECTURES requires that we understand two things: first, our starting point; and, secondly, the major concepts. As far as a starting point is concerned, to place ourselves in far-distant periods, in wholly remote circumstances, would lead us too far afield from our purpose. These periods do exercise an influence upon the present, but only indirectly. We must, in order not to lose ourselves in purely historical detail, begin with Roman times, in which we can find a combination of the most diverse historical forces. Next, we must come to an agreement on the concept of progress in general, and then on the way in which we can understand the role played by leading ideas in combination with this concept.

I. HOW THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD IN HISTORY
If we wished to agree with many philosophers that the whole of humanity has developed from a given original state toward a positive goal, we could present the matter two ways: either a general directing will guides the development of the human race from one point to another, or humanity contains an onward-marching progression of the spirit which necessarily drives it toward a defined goal. I should prefer to characterize both these ways as neither philosophically tenable nor historically provable. Philosophically, the first case eliminates human freedom and makes involuntary tools out of men. The other requires that mankind be God or nothing.

But these positions are also unprovable from an historical viewpoint. First of all, the majority of humanity still finds itself in its original state, at the very starting point. We may thus ask: "What is progress? Where is this progress of mankind to be seen?" There are elements of great historical development which have established themselves in the Latin and Germanic nations. At least

here there is a gradual development of an evolving spiritual force. But one cannot find anywhere in all of history a similar historical pressure of the human spirit. This is a movement originating in early antiquity which has continued with a certain steadiness. But while there is only one system of peoples out of all humanity which took part in this general historical movement, there were, on the contrary, others which were excluded from it. Moreover, we cannot regard the nations included in this movement as enjoying a steady state of progress. For example, if we should look at Asia, we would see that civilization arose there, and that this part of the earth experienced several cultural epochs. But it was there that the tendency, on the whole, was retrogressive, for the most ancient ages of Asiatic culture were the most flourishing; the second and third periods, in which the Greek and Roman element dominated, were already not so significant; and with the invasion of the Mongol barbarians, civilization in Asia came completely to a halt.

An attempt has been made to counter these facts with the hypothesis of a geographical progression, but from the outset I must declare it a worthless position. How could it be maintained, for example, in the case of Peter the Great, that civilization made its progress around the globe, passing from east to west, but then returning again?

A second error to be avoided is the suggestion that all the branches of human experience and knowledge have developed throughout the centuries at the same rate. History shows us—to select only one example from modern times—that art flourished most in the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth. In contrast, it declined most at the end of the seventeenth and during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. Though even here there are moments when this art really stands out, they in no way justify the assertion that art ascends in the course of centuries to a higher power.

If we exclude any law of geographical, evolutionary determinism, and assume, on the other hand, as history teaches us, that peoples can go into decline, as developments once begun do not continue, we shall come to know better in what the continuous movement of mankind really consists. It refers to the great spiritual tendencies which dominate mankind, which arise alongside one another, and which fall into certain arranged patterns. But in these tendencies there is always one certain direction which prevails over the others and causes them to recede. Thus, for example, in the second half of the sixteenth century the religious element was so overpowering that the literary was forced into the background. By contrast, in the eighteenth century, utilitarian efforts at social and economic improvement occupied such wide territory that the arts and related fields had to yield. In every epoch of humanity certain great tendencies are expressed. Progress consists in this: in every period a certain movement of the human spirit is revealed, by which for the first time one or another tendency becomes pre-eminent and maintains itself in its own way.

To adopt a contrary point of view, asserting that progress consists in each epoch's raising the life of humanity to a higher power, and that every generation is more perfect than the preceding one, with the later always the preferred one, the earlier ones only porters for the following

generations, would be a divine injustice. For such a preceding generation would have no significance in and for itself. It would become meaningful only insofar as it became the steppingstone [sic] to the next generation, and would not stand in any immediate relation to the divine. I would maintain that every epoch is immediate to God, and that its value consists, not in what follows it, but in its own existence, its own proper self. This value gives to the contemplation of history, and of individual lives in history, a unique delight, so that every epoch must be regarded as something valid in itself, fully deserving of such respect.

Thus the historian must direct his principal attention to the way in which the people of a certain period thought and lived; he will find that, apart from certain unchangeable main ideas, every epoch has its particular tendency and its own ideal. Though every era has its own justification and its own worth, we should not overlook the results which it causes. Secondly, the historian must discover the differences between the individual epochs, in order to consider the inner necessities affecting the way in which they succeed one another. A certain sort of progress in the process cannot be denied. But I would not want to argue that it moves forward in a straight line. It is more like a stream, whose course winds about in its own way. It seems to me—if I may dare the remark—that God, existing in no particular time, gazes over the whole historic humanity in its totality and finds them all equally valuable. Although the idea of the education of humanity has some truth in it, from God's point of view all the generations of mankind have equal rights, and this is the way the historian too must regard them.

We can assume in the areas of material interest an absolute progress, a highly decisive ascent which would require an enormous upset to bring about a decline. But we cannot find a similar progress in moral affairs. We know that moral ideas can make considerable advance; the same is true in cultural matters. Certain great works of art and literature are nowadays enjoyed by a much larger audience than before. But it would be laughably foolish to wish to be a greater epic poet than Homer or a greater writer of tragedies than Sophocles.

II. WHAT WE SHOULD BELIEVE ABOUT THE SO-CALLED LEADING IDEAS IN HISTORY
Philosophers, especially those of the Hegelian school, have advanced the idea that the history of mankind proceeds like a logical process, with a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis spinning itself out in positives and negatives. But life becomes lost in Scholasticisms, and we have already rejected this view of history as a process of spirit evolving itself according to different logical categories. Such a position would hold that the idea is the only thing possessing an independent life; people would all be mere shadows or phantoms permeated by the idea. This doctrine, by which the World-Spirit causes events equally by deception and takes advantage of human suffering in order to gain its goal, is based upon an extremely unworthy conception of God and Man. It can lead only to pantheism. Mankind would thus be the evolving God who gives birth to Himself through a spiritual process which is part of His nature.

In contrast, I would apply the term “guiding ideas" to the dominant tendencies in each century. These tendencies can be only described, not ultimately defined in a concept. Otherwise, we should be back at the position which I rejected earlier.

The historian must unravel the great tendencies of the centuries and unroll the history of mankind, which is precisely the whole network of these different tendencies. From the viewpoint of the divine idea, I can think of the matter only this way: humanity contains within itself an endless variety of developments which come to view from time to time, according to laws which are unknown to us, more mysterious, and greater than we can conceive.

Source of English translation: Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, edited and translated by Roger Wines. New York: Fordham University Press, 1981, pp. 157-61.