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Leopold Von Ranke (1795–1886): Criticizing an Early Modern Historian

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Leopold Ranke published the first volume of his *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* in 1824, when he was still a teacher of ancient languages at the gymnasium in Frankfurt an der Oder. Ranke was a trained philologist and had written his dissertation on Thucydides, but the book secured him a professorship of history at the University of Berlin. Today, the book is especially famous for Ranke's statement in the introduction that "one has assigned to history the office to judge the past, to educate the contemporary world to the benefit of the future. To such high offices the present draft does not aspire, it just wants to say what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).¹ The distinction was in itself not particularly original but followed a tradition of Enlightenment academic historians, who differentiated between modern historical scholarship, as an independent branch of knowledge making, and early modern history writers, who placed history in the service of theology, moral philosophy, and rhetoric. Ranke further emphasized this distinction in the book's appendix *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtschreiber*, which contained detailed critiques of early modern European history writers. The first and longest chapter was an extensive discussion of the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini and his *Storia d'Italia*, which details the history of Italy from 1490 to 1534. Ranke's book itself did not create a new school of history writing, and the second volume never appeared, but his critical examination of early modern sources in the appendix set new standards for historical criticism and further contributed to the professionalization of the historical scholarship.

Until the eighteenth century, the ideal historian was often described as a general or a statesman, like Guicciardini, who personally had witnessed the events and knew their importance and significance. Already during seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the skeptical critique, known as historical Pyrrhonism, questioned the credibility of such writers and instead drew attention to other sources that themselves were relics of the

1. Leopold Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: G. Reimer, 1824), v–vi.

events. This could be antiquities and ruins, but also written sources such as legal and official documents. By the end of the eighteenth century, the ideal historian was instead described as a trained specialist who knew these sources and had acquired the technical skills to interpret them.² Ranke's book not only reiterated this shift in German historiography but also illustrated how one could approach and critically evaluate older works, such as Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*. Unlike many historians before him, he did not base his book on archival documents but rather on published works that were available in Frankfurt Oder and in the Prussian Royal Library in Berlin.

Ranke started from the assumption that all sources, without exception, should be scrutinized and was much more elaborate in his discussions of individual history writers than any of his predecessors. He first presented the reader to the writers and their biographies and discussed their involvement in the events of their time. In the case of Guicciardini, Ranke started with a three-page description of his life and ambitions, from his time at university to his death in 1540, and discussed how the events of his life were intertwined with the larger history of the period. The portrait was not favorable and depicted the Florentine as a ruthless power player, who, without remorse and inhibitions, served the interests of his patrons. "His big stature, his cruel gaze," Ranke noted, "kept everyone in fear and at distance . . . however, among the higher classes he maintained an unweakened reputation."³ To know the past, the scholar first had to know the writers of the sources to the past. The acquaintance with Guicciardini was clearly not a pleasant experience.

Knowing the author also meant knowing his style of writing. So, after the first portrait, Ranke discussed the genre of the *Storia d'Italia* and concluded that it was written as a chronicle, which, to Ranke's distaste, sacrificed narrative and connections for a strict chronological order. These initial reflections opened for a longer discussion of the content of the work. If a writer was included among "the documentary history writers, whom we agree to call source,"⁴ this investigation should first of all establish whether the writer had witnessed the events. The task of the historian, who reconstructed past events, resembled that of the philologist, who reconstructed ancient texts.

2. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Relics of the Past: Antiquarianism and Archival Authority in Enlightenment Germany," *Storia della Storiografia* 68, no. 2 (2015): 69–81. Also, on early modern skepticism, see Anton M. Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), esp. 233–63; and, on the changing ideal of the historian, Jan M. Sawilla, "Das Zeugnis des Historiographen: Anwesenheit und gestufte Plausibilität in der Geschichtsschreibung der Frühen Neuzeit," *Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft: Perspektiven aus der Vormoderne*, ed. Wolfram Drews and Heike Schlie (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 311–35.

3. Leopold Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtschreiber* (Leipzig: G. Reimer, 1824), 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

Before engaging in the interpretation of sources, he had to unravel the history of these sources and distinguish between original and derived sources.⁵ If the writer was not a firsthand witness, and did not contribute with new information, he was no longer relevant to the investigation and could be discarded. Guicciardini started his history in 1492, when he was ten years old and could not yet have witnessed the events himself. Only when he became a servant to the Medici family, in the second decade of the sixteenth century, did his account acquire value as a source. Even then, Ranke had to distinguish between firsthand and secondhand information. “Before any use of the book”, he demanded, “one must ask if its reports are original, and when borrowed, in which way and through what kind of research they have been brought together.”⁶

If and when a writer could be considered a firsthand witness or conveyed new information about otherwise unavailable firsthand testimonies, the next task became to establish his credibility. Ranke made this investigation from internal evidence within the texts as well as through comparisons with other works. The parts of *Storia d'Italia* where Guicciardini had borrowed or copied from other writers might not be useful as sources, but they revealed much about the author. They showed that his work “hardly can demand the reputation of documentness [*Urkundlichkeit*] or accurate research.”⁷ Most important, Ranke could see whether Guicciardini faithfully reproduced the earlier accounts or adjusted these for his own purposes. A central part of this investigation was Ranke’s discussion of speeches reproduced in *Storia d'Italia*. These appeared authentic, and other historians had copied them uncritically, but Ranke showed that they had been derived from other sources and that Guicciardini had not done so accurately. In some cases, he had invented speeches and tampered with the evidence.

This discovery made Ranke question not only the speeches themselves but also Guicciardini’s character. He had proven “unfaithful to history” and could no longer be trusted.⁸ His inventions and tampering might be explained by the early modern rhetorical traditions, but they were fundamentally opposed to the ideals of modern historical scholarship. “We in our time,” Ranke claimed, “have another concept of history. The naked truth without any ornaments, thorough research of the particular, the rest left to God: Only no fiction, also not in the smallest, only no fantasy.”⁹ However,

5. On these distinctions in philology, see also Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Tradition of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Sabastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann’s Method*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6. Ranke, *Zur Kritik*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 15.

8. *Ibid.*, 24.

9. *Ibid.*, 28.

not all early modern historical works were as problematic as Guicciardini's. One historian who almost passed Ranke's tests was Paolo Giovio, a sixteenth-century Roman physician and history writer. Like his contemporaries, Giovio indulged in "oratory redressing and ornamentation of things." However, he was also "truly original," largely impartial, reported the "facts," and wrote "bitter truths" about his patrons. He did not just copy from other historians but went directly to the primary sources, written as well as oral. He had collected "a large treasure of the best and most original reports" and based his writings on information "from the mouths of the most distinguished participants and other eyewitnesses."¹⁰ In the end, Ranke's distinction between early modern and modern historians was not as much temporal as moral. The core problem with Guicciardini was not that he was an early modern but that he was untrustworthy. Passing judgment remained an important office of historical research. Only the historian should start by judging his peers, past as well as present. Ranke distinguished not only between good and bad early modern historians, such as Giovio and Guicciardini, but also between good and bad modern historians. Those who uncritically continued to quote Guicciardini and similar sources belonged to the latter category. So, his appendix delivered critical tools that historians could use to determine the credibility of their sources and, at the same time, to differentiate between insiders and outsiders of the discipline.

Ranke's philological emphasis on "original reports" and "documentary historians" also reemphasized the need for archival research. In 1824, he had not yet visited archives or uncovered new unknown manuscript sources, but, at the end of the appendix, he declared the need for future archival research. If most of the printed works no longer could be trusted, a new kind of historian was needed, one who traveled across Europe and based his writings on archival material.¹¹ This new archival historian should search not only for written sources that were relics of past events, such as legal and official documents, but also for credible narrative sources. Shortly after his arrival as professor at the University of Berlin, Ranke uncovered several such sources at the Prussian Royal Library, in the form of Venetian diplomatic reports from different European courts. His work with these sources in 1827 resulted in his *Fürsten und Völker von Süd-Europa*, which carried the programmatic subtitle "Primarily from unpublished diplomatic reports."¹² In the following years, he traveled to Austria and Italy

10. Ibid., 72–4.

11. Ibid., 181.

12. Leopold Ranke, *Fürsten und Völker von Süd-Europa im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert. Vornehmlich aus ungedruckten Gesandtschafts-Berichten* (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1827).

to find more sources and, through a series of publications, established his reputation as an archival researcher.¹³

Ranke was not the first to base his historical work on archival material. During the past century, many scholars had considered archival research as a possible solution to the challenge of historical skepticism. Enlightenment historians thoroughly investigated European archives and published large collections of archival sources. Ranke, however, taught generations of historians how to read narrative sources, such as Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*, and how to use these insights to shape their professional identities as historians. In 1834, he inaugurated his exercises (*Übungen*) on the medieval Saxon kings and emperors, which from the second half of the nineteenth-century was celebrated as the beginning of modern historical discipline. In these exercises, students learned how to critique primary sources and also employed these critical techniques when discussing one another's papers. Throughout the nineteenth century, the investigation into the historian's character remained a standard feature of German historical research, and the training of the student's character remained a central part of history education.¹⁴

FIRST PUBLICATION

- Ranke, Leopold. 1824a. *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*. Vol. 1. Leipzig and Berlin: G. Reimer.
- . 1824b. *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtschreiber: Eine Beylage zu desselben romanischen und germanischen Geschichten*. Leipzig and Berlin: G. Reimer.

RECOMMENDED ENGLISH TRANSLATION

- von Ranke, Leopold. 1981. *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on The Art and Science of History*, translated by Roger Wines. New York: Fordham University Press. [The translation in this collection is only of the introduction to *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* and a selection of the Guicciardini chapter in *Kritik neuerer Geschichtschreiber*. It is based not on the first 1824 edition, referred to in this essay, but on the later edited version published in 1874 in Ranke's collected works.]

RECOMMENDED SELECTION FOR STUDENTS

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13. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 3 (2008): 425–53.

14. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Private Übungen und verkörpertes Wissen: Zur Unterrichtspraxis der Geschichtswissenschaft im neunzehnten Jahrhundert," in *Akademische Wissenskulturen. Praktiken des Lehrens und Forschens vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne, Schriften der Gesellschaft für Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Martin Kintzinger and Sita Steckel. (Bern: Schwabe, 2015), 143–61.

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