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Leopold von Ranke, His Library, and the Shaping of Historical Evidence

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Leopold von Ranke, His Library, and the Shaping of Historical Evidence

BY EDWARD MUIR

Syracuse University has long nourished a special memory of the great nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern history. Ranke is to historians what Darwin is to biologists and Freud to psychologists, the revered author of the discipline's methods and the presiding personality from an age when science promised so much for the betterment of humanity. During the last century earnest American students who hoped to elevate American intellectual life to European standards flocked in particular to Germany so that they might come into contact with the most advanced learning. The German influence, in fact, decidedly altered American education from *garten für kinder* to post-graduate professional training.

For Americans interested in history there was only one goal—the Berlin seminar presided over by Ranke. There, Ranke and his students carefully poured over original sources from Europe's past in the pursuit of documentary criticism. They avoided chronicles and contemporary histories, which were riddled with error and marred by bias, and concentrated on government charters and decrees, bureaucratic files, and especially diplomatic dispatches and reports. With these documents, it was thought, historians could write true 'scientific' histories.

The historical methods Ranke taught in his seminar offered an alternative to the ancient standard set by Thucydides. In the introduction to his *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (bk. 1, sec. 1), the Greek historian (trans. Richard Crawley) wrote:

The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but I shall be content if it is judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future,

which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it. My history has been composed to be an everlasting possession, not the showpiece of an hour.

This humanist view about the moral utility of history goes back at least to Euripides and is preserved in our own time by Santayana's famous aphorism, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it".

Ranke saw the role of history differently. To him such sentiments made history a branch of moral philosophy where rhetorical form and ethical maxims subordinated the pursuit of simple accuracy. Ranke announced his alternative goal for history as early as 1824 in the preface to his *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* in a passage that was, in effect, a response to Thucydides:

You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was. ["Wie es eigentlich gewesen."]

"How it really was" became the clarion call of Ranke's followers who sought the truth about the past by finding and analyzing the directly-recorded deeds and thoughts of history's great personalities.

Based on the model of the Berlin seminar, students of Ranke established America's first Ph.D. program in history at The Johns Hopkins University. Another veteran of Ranke's seminar, Charles W. Bennett, became the first professor of history at the new university founded in 1870 at Syracuse. In its early years the fledgling university tried to do everything at once: raise money, recruit well-trained faculty, start teaching students, provide classrooms, equip laboratories, and acquire a library collection. The last was a very pressing need. During the 1880s when benefactors offered to help build up the library, Bennett returned to Berlin and began negotiations with his old mentor to purchase at Ranke's death the extraordinary personal library the historian had assembled in developing his method and writing his books. Ranke called the sources in his collection the 'lumber' he used to build his own works. Although Ranke had wished for his carefully-selected library to remain in Prussia as a personal



Leopold von Ranke. This oil portrait, by H. G. Herrmann after J. Schrader, Berlin, 1883, hangs in the George Arents Research Library.

monument to his labors, bureaucratic red tape and political infighting after his death in 1886 kept the Prussian government from taking up its option to purchase the library. On 22 April 1887 Ranke's son sold the entire collection to Syracuse University.¹

Box after box containing some 17,000 books, 4000 pamphlets, and 430 manuscripts arrived in Syracuse and were stored for several years in the basement of the building we now call the Hall of Languages. Eventually, Ranke's library had its own home, at first in the turreted red-brick building (now used by the University's administration), the fortress-like strength of which is echoed in the architecture of Bird Library, the present home of the collection. It has taken

1. William Freeman Galpin, *Syracuse University*, vol. 1, *The Pioneer Days* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1952), 88–93. Jeremy C. Jackson, "Leopold von Ranke and the von Ranke Library", *The Courier* 10 ([Fall] 1972): 45. John J. Morrison, "Charles W. Bennett's 'The Purchase of the von Ranke Library': A Prefatory Note" and Charles W. Bennett, "The Purchase of the von Ranke Library", *The Courier* 15 (Summer 1978): 15–17 and 19–31, respectively.

many years to bring the Ranke Library up to modern standards of accessibility for research scholars, students, and the public. Various efforts over the years at cataloguing and preserving the collection culminated in the Ranke Cataloguing Project, which began in 1977 under the partial sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the direction of Donald C. Anthony, Director of Libraries, and James M. Powell, Professor of History. Syracuse University Press published in 1983 a complete catalogue of the manuscripts in the collection.² Finding aids are now available for the pamphlets, and most of the books have been entered into an on-line data base used by research libraries throughout the country.

The year 1986 was the centenary of Ranke's death. To commemorate his contribution to the historical profession and the modern consciousness of the past, Syracuse University organized an international conference held on campus in October. The American Historical Association, which elected Ranke as its first honorary member, joined Syracuse as a co-sponsor. The conference, "Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline", brought together over forty participants from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, East and West Germany, and Italy. Papers ranged from the provocative "Ranke the Reactionary" by Peter Burke of Cambridge University to the specialized "Ranke's Historical Method in the Views of Droysen, Lorenz, and Bernheim" by Hans Schleier of the Akademie der Wissenschaften of the German Democratic Republic.

The papers that related most directly to the collections in Ranke's library were by two colleagues from the University of Venice, Gino Benzoni, who spoke on "Ranke's Favorite Source: The *Relazioni* of the Venetian Ambassadors", and Ugo Tucci, who presented a paper on "Ranke and the Venetian Document Market". These are the papers published in this issue of the *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*.

Among the 430 manuscripts that Ranke collected, by far the largest number consists of Venetian ambassadors' dispatches and reports. These documents date from the early sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century and contain accounts that ambassadors

2. Edward Muir, *The Leopold von Ranke Manuscript Collection of Syracuse University: The Complete Catalogue* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1983).

sent back to the Venetian Senate from their posts in Turin, Milan, Mantua, Monferrato, Urbino, Naples, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, France, Prussia, Spain, England, Scotland, the United Provinces, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Egypt. There are, in addition, reports from Venetian colonial administrators on the Dalmatian coast and in the Greek isles.

When a Venetian ambassador returned from his term abroad, he was required to read a final report of his activities to the Senate. These reports, or *relazioni*, came to have a standard format in which the ambassador discussed the geography, climate, economy, military capacity, and political institutions, as well as court gossip of the country he had visited. As early as the sixteenth century the informational value of these reports was recognized, and Venetians and foreigners alike began to collect and sometimes even to publish them. Venice's efficient diplomatic service was often given credit for the fact that the city somehow survived as an independent republic during the great age of absolutist monarchies, and so the writers of the *relazioni* came to have a European-wide reputation for exceptional sagacity and insight.

In 1797 Napoleon finally crushed the Republic of Venice, and in the post-Napoleonic peace congress in Vienna, Venice was further humbled, becoming a subject province of the Austrian Empire. Without an independent government concerned to preserve its secrets, the Venetian archives were opened to the world at a time when virtually no other state archive in Europe permitted full access. At the same time, the scions of Venice's noble families were desperately short of cash and many were forced to sell off palaces, paintings, furnishings, books, and private papers that in many cases included copies of *relazioni* that distant ancestors had delivered to the now defunct Senate.

Such was the situation in 1825 when the thirty-year-old Leopold Ranke (he had not yet earned his honorific *von*) arrived in Venice for a research trip. From a bookseller named Adolfo Cesare he bought some one hundred bound manuscripts that had once been owned by the Nani and Da Ponte families. Through Cesare and Ranke's friend Francesco Francesconi, a historian at the University of Padua, the young German scholar picked up on this and subsequent trips manuscripts from the Dandolo, Soranzo, Gradenigo, and Tozzetti family

libraries. He rounded out his collection with official copies of *relazioni* from the state archives.³ With these materials he rebuilt the edifice of European historiography, treating the *relazioni* that he had acquired as the supporting timbers of his work, as privileged sources of information collected without bias by ambassadors from neutral Venice.

The Venetian *relazioni*, Ranke thought, liberated him from the tyranny of *a priori* assumptions, which had marred the accuracy of the humanist histories of Thucydides and his successors, and made it possible for him to apprehend past facts in order to form *a posteriori* conclusions. Professor Benzoni's paper, however, helps us to understand that Ranke's assumption about the character of the *relazioni* was an illusion.

Ranke's so-called liberating method was in fact his unwitting mental prison: the 'facts' found in the Venetian *relazioni* were neither pure nor neutral. They were instead the artifices of a self-absorbed, intellectually closed-off ruling caste. The conservative world-view of the Venetian nobles has been analyzed in recent decades by many historians, most importantly by Italian American scholars, who have discovered how singularly isolated Venetian rulers were from the mainstream of European thought, especially after the sixteenth century. Venetian patricians were, as a result, remarkably myopic in judging their own affairs, not to mention those of others.⁴ One of the leading Venetian patrician intellectuals of the mid-eighteenth century, Marco Foscarini, wrote a study, *On the Perfection of the Venetian Republic*, which assumed that the last word in political thought came from the Venetian writer Gaspare Contarini, who had lived two centuries before.⁵ Neither Machiavelli nor Hobbes; Locke nor even Vico, let alone Voltaire, entered into Foscarini's evaluation. When the men from Foscarini's ruling class went on diplomatic missions, they saw, as Benzoni shows, not so much the actual conditions

3. Muir, *Ranke Manuscript Collection*, xi–xiii.

4. The most wide-ranging work of revisionism treats political rather than intellectual history, but it neatly summarizes the myth of the patriciate. See Donald E. Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate: Reality versus Myth* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

5. Marco Foscarini, *Necessità della storia e della perfezione della Repubblica Veneziana*, ed. Luisa Ricaldone (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983).

abroad as the distorted mirrors of Venice. Their famous *relazioni*, moreover, were highly rhetorical exercises designed to tell the senators what they wanted to hear, and some of the lazier ambassadors were prone to copy from the report of a predecessor.

But Professor Benzoni also raises more profound questions. Are there such things as pure historical facts? Can history ever be anything more than an account of past points of view or at best a comparison of past and present views? These questions present the problem of meaning. Without an interpretive context, a fact, in and of itself, means nothing and in different contexts could mean different things. Even if we assume we could isolate unadulterated facts, the selection of the sources of our facts—which Ranke taught is the historian's first and most critical task—and the connection of one fact to another are themselves acts of interpretation.

The *relazioni*, however, have not necessarily lost their value, but they can no longer be understood in Ranke's terms. The *relazioni* are primarily catalogues of past perceptions and are particularly valuable because in them Venetian civic republicanism confronts the very different world of kings and nation states. In such meetings the contours and limits of Venetian mental horizons may become most brilliantly evident.

Professor Tucci's paper reveals that the problem of Ranke's famous sources is even more vexing than the fact that they were the product of the special local concerns of the Venetian patriciate. The availability of the *relazioni* to Ranke was largely the effect of the forces of the antiquarian market, forces that took little account of the potential value of documents as historical sources. Such forces were governed by economic laws rather than by any rational process of selectivity. Ranke may have given priority to the *relazioni* as sources primarily because they were available to him, and they were available because at the Congress of Vienna the major powers chose not to restore the Republic of Venice. He apparently wrote his history of the Venetians in the Peloponnesus, for example, not because of the vitality of the problems the subject presented but because he possessed the necessary Venetian sources.

Drawn by forces that were independent of reasoned criteria of selectivity, Ranke and many historians since have tunneled into the past following the accidents of documentary survival and availability.

All historians, nevertheless, can only rely on what is available to them. The trick is to keep from being trapped by these accidents of fate, to avoid the moral posturing of Thucydides, and to be cautious about the naive empiricism of Ranke.