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RANKE'S UNIVERSAL HISTORY AND NATIONAL HISTORY

ERNST SCHULIN

THERE IS NO DOUBT that Ranke was an eminently productive historian. His historiographic achievements were outstanding even for the nineteenth century, which boasted both of diligent writers who wrote multivolume works and of an equally diligent reading public. However, what he did not write were the two works which he himself considered essential and which would have embodied all his intentions. The one was a world history of the modern time, the other a German history from the very beginning up to his present time. With his first published book, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker seit 1494*, he did embark on the former. But the project was not continued. Ranke contented himself with presenting and writing the histories of individual European states on universal viewpoints, in explicit modern epochs of mainly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He did eventually return to a world history. However, in casting far back to classical antiquity, he only reached the early twelfth century, falling short of the period he considered truly essential. His students prepared his German history in the *Jahrbücher des Deutschen Reiches*, and he himself dealt selectively with crucial epochs in histories of the Reformation and of Prussia, in *Wallenstein*, and in the history of the Fürstenbund. Other periods were treated in smaller studies. But the segments were never drawn into a complete portrait, not even in his lectures.

We can decide only upon a closer look whether these were, or might have become, his essential works. Of valuable assistance in such an investigation are the pieces from his lectures, which were published by W. P. Fuchs and H. V. Dotterweich in volume four of *Aus Werk und Nachlaß* (1975).

UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF THE MODERN PERIOD: THE EUROPEAN SYSTEM OF STATES

Of initial and special interest is Ranke's basic approach to a world history of the modern period—his interest in factors that are normally represented only as the foreign political and military interrelations of European states. We find this interest reflected in his essay of *Die Großen Mächte* (1833), which is a brief survey of the formation of Europe since the time of Louis XIV and an exemplary description of the power shifts in international relations. In the introduction, however, Ranke hastened to explain that he had in this instance deliberately limited himself to describing “the great events,” to out-

lining the progress of relations among the different nations. Of different breadth and depth are his concurrent lectures, winter term 1833–34, on the early modern period, which also dealt with the foreign policies and wars of the states; but the accent was on the nations themselves. They are the true active agents in the general course of history through all ages. Between individual human life and humankind's universal history stand the nations; thus already in 1825 the young Ranke stated: "Three objects must not be lost from sight: the human species, the nations, the individual."¹ In 1833 he observed: "We shall show how the human species gains consciousness of itself. It occurs in that the individual nations unite in systems of nations which, for a certain period, dominate the world."²

The mature Ranke still insisted that universal history would degenerate into "fantasies and philosophizing once it left the firm ground of national histories."³ This is by no means an entirely new or special notion. Ranke was familiar with the world histories of eighteenth-century Göttingen historians that emphasized the sequence and coexistential balance of states, the formation of state systems in general, and the formation of European states from the sixteenth century onward in particular. Ranke was also familiar with Johann Gottfried von Herder's sensitive probe into nations and their specific national originality evident in national literatures. With particular insistence Ranke attempted a synthesis of the systems of states and the nations animated by national literature toward new self-awareness. In this synthesis he recognized the salient features of general modern history. Primarily indicative to him was that world historical impetus had in modern times, from the sixteenth century onward, derived entirely from Europe. Like the historians of the eighteenth century and of today, but to much firmer purpose than other nineteenth-century historians, Ranke argued that in the past there had been other nations and national systems of equal or superior power and culture. It seemed characteristic to him, next, that Europe dominated the world not as a unified empire (like Rome or China) but as a multiple, mutually conditioning system of states each hallmarked by a rise in national identity.

He demonstrated this in his lectures. The formation of nations was for Ranke a tendency essentially independent of religion, although, as he emphasized, the process had already been set in motion in medieval times through Christendom, while the persistent tendencies of Islam had been destructive and egalitarian. Protestantism had come to give an even stronger impulse to the development of nations, each toward its own individual, confessional national unity. The sixteenth century, as he showed it, had been conditioned less through the rivalries for power between Spain and France than through national domestic struggles and consolidations. Ranke traced these back primarily to the conflicts between monarchs and aristocracies but also discovered common European developments, such as the turn to Catholicism by the French, the Dutch, and the Reich's nobility in 1580. The gathering forces of the counterrevolution then led to the war in Europe during the seventeenth century. The struggles for power in the aftermath were secular in nature and mainly directed against French predominance. The other Great Powers—England, Austria, Russia, and Prussia—emerged at this point. With the exception of England, these powers were under the rule of absolute monarchs. Those under aristocratic rule—Spain, Poland, and the Reich—were marked by a loss in power.

1. Ranke, *Aus Werk und Nachlaß, Vorlesungseinleitungen*, ed. W. P. Fuchs and H. V. Dotterweich (Munich and Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1975), 4:36.

2. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:98.

3. Ranke, *Weltgeschichte* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883), vol. 1:viii.

RANKE'S ANALYSIS related to internal conditions prevalent in the different nations, whereby his interest touched also on the parallelism, or disparity, of religious components and on the power struggles between estates and monarchs in the different countries. He was, besides, keenly aware of the cooperation and rivalries among the European states. These three viewpoints interlace, the third being by no means the essential, or dominant, element. State formations and national formations are not one and the same thing, though Ranke was interested in the results of their interactions. The general course of history, he concluded, was from the late seventeenth century conditioned by shifting power constellations among the Great Powers, not simply by constellations among all European nations. The Great Powers (France, England, Russia, Austria, and Prussia) were in turn conditioned by their specific domestic conditions. France was, to Ranke, not only an exemplary modern monarchy, but also the first completely unified national state, politically, religiously, and literarily. It had been Richelieu's achievement of "reconciling all French people with France and all France with the king."⁴ Its rise in power was the inevitable result and was a danger to the whole of Europe.

4. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:471. Lectures of 1833–34, 61st lesson.

5. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:391.

6. Lectures of 1833–34, 78th lesson.

England was a completely different nation and, because of its parliamentary constitution, a seemingly weaker nation, which Ranke came to admire. In the form of two parties, stabilizing and creative forces were set free that, by their very conflict, were not detrimental to the state, but rather were beneficial. It allowed even extreme liberal postulates to become politically valid in the form of North America's emancipation from its colonists.⁵ Ranke preferred to see England's role as a power balance on the Continent and its world-dominating role as a leading Western power in this context. Russia as a nation seemed more problematic to Ranke. The "combination of a European style of government and Slavic nationality lent strength to the country," but the foreign influences were hostile to the development of the people "toward truly moral and noble predispositions."⁶ Germany, politically and religiously divided, belonged in this duality—in the two states of Austria and Prussia—to the Great Powers. After the recapture of Hungary, Ranke could accept Austria as a new powerful state, as an amalgamation of multiple nationalities. He could not accept it as a nationality. In the case of Prussia he argued that its rise in power under Frederick the Great had decisively contributed to the rebirth of German literature and national consciousness.

In their greatly different domestic formations, these five Great Powers had dominated the European system of states since the seventeenth century and were again doing so in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon. "The formation of the Great Powers" Ranke jotted down for his 1832–33 lectures in respect to the entire modern period.

It has always been a matter of balance—in the beginning I would say of the rivals Spain and France—later a balance of interests, French and anti-French interests, the land powers' and the sea powers' interests; but that five Great Powers, each sovereign, each with particular interests, would consult together on all important matters, so that—at least up to this day albeit under the most difficult circumstances—a solution has always been found, that is new, it is the sense behind the present state of things.⁷

7. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:90–91.

The strength of his convictions on the world historical importance of the interactions of the Great Powers is thus signified in his lectures on modern world history by the way he traced the links between external and internal and, in turn, national perspectives. This perception is of central importance for Ranke's historical approach. It is determinative for his entire historical writing, and also essential for his historical theory, especially for his claim of historical objectivity.

In his historical writing, however, such a design posed its own descriptive problems. Such polyphony could neither be described as a static system nor as a homogeneous development. It was, among others, a precarious blend of both. Ranke rejected nothing more vehemently than the historicophilosophic doctrine that "the aim of universal history was to find a genetic answer for the situation of the world today."⁸ He had heard this as a student in the very first lecture. He rejected this doctrine because it was only partly correct. The European system of nations was old. In a shifting web of constellations it had shaped itself after universal power constellations or tendencies—the Roman Empire, Charlemagne, the papal hierarchy of the late Middle Ages, French hegemonic presumptions under Louis XIV and under Napoleon. And however static such constellations had been, their further developments and stabilizations had to be considered, without knowledge of a world historical end. Conflict must therefore be the salient point of description: the tensions tending toward equilibrium or toward a new constellation of forces. "It is no constant development," emphasized Ranke in a lecture of 1861, "it is unending struggle between forces that permeate the world. The Romanic and the Germanic world, Islam and Christendom, the papacy and Imperial power, Protestants and Catholics, revolutionary and conservative tendencies resist one another, yet their conflict draws them together, they are inseparably linked."⁹ There is a good deal of simple faith contained in this interpretation. It is this faithful trust in the harmonizing and finally stabilizing confluent efficacy of particular interests and oppositional forces that Ranke shared with the Scottish rational economic and social theories of the eighteenth century and, later, of liberalism. "In great danger," Ranke optimistically declared, "we can always put our trust in the guardian spirit that has reliably saved Europe from being dominated by any one-sided or violent tendency, has met pressure from the one side with pressure from the other and has, in the union of the whole, happily saved freedom and individuality."¹⁰

But if conflict and shifting power constellations are thus the structural components of his design, its own dilemma soon becomes apparent: narrowed down it might lead to the misunderstanding that international relations and wars were the cardinal points of Ranke's historical concepts, which is not so. His vital interest touched on individual lives and the further progress of nations. "General history does not merely live from the interaction among states and empires," he explained in an 1858 lecture on English history, "because that would be no more than a history of diplomatic relations: it consists of what they have in common."¹¹ But that, together with the respective individual national developments which landmarked modern world history, posed problems for integrative description. And it had not been achieved in the *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, which was why Ranke insisted on calling it "histories"—*Geschichten*—and not "the history"—

8. *Ibid.*, 118, 303.9. *Ibid.*, 414.10. Ranke, *Die Großen Mächte*, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1872), 24:11.11. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:282.

12. Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 33–34:vi.

13. Ranke, *Die Großen Mächte*, 24:34.

die Geschichte.¹² In *Die Großen Mächte* he talked about the “very instructive, congenial” book that could be written about the various ways the national forces in the states had benefited from monarchist policies hostile to the estates.¹³ He tried his hand at this in his lectures and would undoubtedly also have liked to write the book. But his source-critical scholarship, the process of fact-finding, and the attending imbalance of the theme as a whole forbade its realization. It had led him to particularize and to review individual states: the Osmans, the Spanish monarchy, the Popes. Making a virtue out of necessity, he began to write universal history from the angle of individual nations: again, not in terms of integrated national histories but broken up into national epochs of general historical significance whereby he aimed at symmetry of original sources and epochal importance—albeit with varying success. Adopting this method first for the history of his own country in descriptions of the Reformation and of Prussia, he followed up with histories of other Great Powers: France and England. Ranke wrote national histories which were animated by European, and therefore universal, viewpoints.

This became his great and renowned historical genre in which he rose to undisputed mastery. If it was, ostensibly, no general history of the modern world, indirectly and through its universal integrants it seemed to be something like it. I have to emphasize that, by its very nature, it could not be that, at least not in a balanced form. Imbalance and bias were unavoidable. General trends in parallel but autonomous national developments receded into the background and, even more so, the general European world influence. In the foreground we find foreign policy and wars, admittedly not simply as in general European histories, but yet in the form of evaluations of internal and external power constellations. In the case of Ranke's concept of Europe's development by virtue of conflicting national forces, we cannot speak of a “primacy of foreign policies,” but we can speak of an inexorable interactive mechanism of internal and external constituents. A state marked by destructive internal conflicts can weaken externally, can be dominated by another state, and can, eventually, put at risk the “European element” in European history, like Poland in the eighteenth century. An externally ineffectual state loses reputation internally, like France in the eighteenth century. History is not entirely a matter of power constellations, but they do condition the entire historical process in such great measure that their manifestation becomes the vital point of interest. Foreign policies are, in the Rankean concept, evaluated by means of the rich documentary evidence of diplomatic and warring relations; domestic policies by means of often more abstract evaluation of power structures: visible, for instance, in the conflict of centralizing and particularizing forces, mainly those between monarch and estates, state and church, rival conservative and revolutionary tendencies in public opinion, the result also of economic power and popular unrest. The “moral energies” liberated in these conflicts are thereby fully integrated, but nonpolitical or other elusive power factors recede into the background.

It has always been admired how much non-German history Ranke described using this framework in a century devoted to national historiography, and how much more intensively so than would have been possible, or necessary, in an integrative European history. If we look at his conceptual design of a modern world history we become, however, aware of significant limitations. Not all Great Powers are represented, and the choice of which

period should be of world historical significance is not consistent and depended, in part, on the availability of source material and also on Ranke's and his reading public's prevailing political and national mood. This is why in the 1840s he did not realize his plan to write a history of the French Revolution. In the fifties he presented earlier French history as an antecedental explanation for the country's power-political and hegemonic presumptions which, in little changed form, had been a continuing challenge for the Europe and Germany of Ranke's time. English history was for the Ranke of the sixties an exemplary development toward constitutionalism which, in the wake of the 1848 Revolution, he was keen to recommend to Germany and Prussia. If national German interests had already influenced these two publications they did so to even greater purpose in the other two (Reformation and Prussian history). It might be said that his activities for a modern world history were often diverted or crossed by his preoccupation with a German history.

RANKE'S GERMAN HISTORY

We turn now to the second nonwritten work of Ranke's. Ranke had indeed always felt dedicated to the task of writing a native history—an integrated German history that would connect the German past with the German present. It was clearly German history much more than European history that drew Ranke into his research on the Middle Ages. It is curious to see how he interpreted and, in a certain sense, resolved it on universal perspectives, which his lectures expressed with great clarity.

Ranke lectured quite often on German history with a focus on the Middle Ages. Upon the perusal of earlier literature (Häberlin, C. A. Menzel, Luden, Leo), he commented: "A coherent and at the same time thorough history remains to be written and would be of great merit. The French and the English have achieved more in the matter of form. Hume especially succeeded in being universally read and respected. But Hume, too, would have failed on the German history. It is so infinitely extensive and manifold."¹⁴ Former works had focused on the stance of the church, of the Reich; latter ones "on that of the provinces." It seemed to him (in 1842) "that now the time has come for a national viewpoint."¹⁵ Ranke's meticulous sifting of written source evidence as to fact or fiction—whereby he sadly concluded that it had been the twelfth century "that had deviated from the pure and proper conception of history and precipitated itself into the fabulous"¹⁶—reminds us of Niebuhr's critical reconstruction of Roman history.

The task was indeed fraught with difficulties. The German past was not only a compound of complex elements; in Ranke's view it also far anteceded those of other nations (he used to tie up their beginnings with the high or late Middle Ages). But for the German nation—although it had, properly speaking, not existed before the ninth century—he insisted on starting with the Teutons of Roman times. This was the current of eighteenth-century opinion and also the scholarly opinion of his own time. In reflecting it, Ranke appears more Germanophile than he does otherwise with his emphasis on the Romanic-Germanic. To Ranke, the Germans were a far more historic, older nation than the French, English, Italians, Spaniards, Poles, Hungarians, or Russians, whose "elements" had not been "unified" until the tenth or twelfth, or even fifteenth, centuries. And he hotly disputed the notion of these others as "naturally grown." "In contrast to that we find the Ger-

14. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:335.

15. *Ibid.*, 175.

16. *Ibid.*, 328.

17. *Ibid.*, 317. Also similarly, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 2:126.

18. Ranke, *Werk und Nachlaß*, 4:317–18.

19. *Ibid.*, 320.

20. *Ibid.*, 473.

21. L. Krieger, *Ranke—The Meaning of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 36, 132. Pertinent literature for the whole paper: H. v. Caemmerer, "Ranke's 'Große Mächte' und die Geschichtsschreibung des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Studien und Versuche zur neueren Geschichte*, dedicated to Max Lenz (Berlin: Paetel, 1910); E. Schulin, *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke* (Göttingen, 1958); A. Kemiläinen, *Die historische Sendung der Deutschen in Leopold von Ranke's Geschichtsdenken* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1968); G. Berg, *Leopold von Ranke als akademischer Lehrer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968); K. H. Metz, *Grundformen historiographischen Denkens: Wissenschaftsgeschichte als Methodologie: Dargestellt an Ranke, Treitschke und Lamprecht* (Munich: W. Fink, 1979).

man tribes, by which I mean those same tribes from which evolved our nation of today, as far back as the 2nd century BC and as soon as the West of Europe opened itself to historical cognizance. From 2000 years ago we find them in historically recorded continuous development."¹⁷ In this long development he recognized three prominent features. There was first the influence exerted on other, later nations: "It is quite clear that the great nationalities, the French and the English above all but also earlier Italy, and Russia of even latter times, would never have been formed without the great Germanic nation. Just as infinite has been the contribution by the German essence [*Wesen*] on the formation of the modern world altogether." There was second the conspicuous purity of the German nationality; for "since the first possessions there have been no further immigrations to Germany." There was third the "multiplicity of conditions [and] national formations from her lap."¹⁸ All religious, political, and cultural directions of Europe coexisted in Germany, Ranke asserted with enthusiasm in his lectures of the fifties. "From the multiplicity in even common features grows her ideal unity and inherent strength, she is a power in the world."¹⁹ Not least that two of the Great Powers, Austria and Prussia, "stemmed from her lap" confirmed to Ranke that "Germany has ever been the centre of the aspirations of the whole world."²⁰

Ranke's lofty historical perceptions of Germany's importance may lead us to conclude that he meant to capture in Germany's history the fountainhead and continuing essential, motivating elements of medieval and modern history, having conceived, in a closely similar manner, of the European system of states as the powerful and cultural nucleus of the historical world. But in so overdrawing his design he debarred himself from writing a national history of Germany. This might also explain why, in contrast to the other German historians and to the foreign historians of his time who nearly all wrote national history, Ranke took to writing European history.

DEVELOPMENT AND UNITY IN RANKE'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

I have conducted an investigation into the texture of Ranke's national and universal conceptions and meanings, the particular slant of their configuration, and the resultant bias and cause for misunderstandings. I conclude with a résumé of Ranke's historiographic achievements. Leonard Krieger's book, *Ranke—The Meaning of History*, is the first detailed investigation into modulations in Ranke's historical writing and theories as conditioned by the personal circumstances and politics of his time. Absorbed with Ranke's constancy in basic conceptions, his classicism of style, and his nonpartisanship in the description of oppositional historical forces, we might easily overlook that Ranke was a most restless, inquisitive historian with an easy grasp of selection and interpretation, a many-faceted thinker untiringly bent on formulating the larger contexts under new impressions, sometimes only by way of experiment. Krieger conjectured that Ranke became a historian because it was only in history, historical sequence, and duality that he could reconcile the otherwise incompatible elements in human life.²¹ Historical vitality and effectiveness of the European nations were of lifelong fascination to him, yet it is undeniable that he depicted them with shifting accents.

In the 1820s he essentially accentuated their unity, their confluent efficacy—

but with more insistence and wishful thinking than his descriptions could substantiate. The *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* were not continued. What followed instead were portraits of single states with the focus on internal structures. In this manner he described first the Osmons and the Spanish monarchy and subsequently broke the project off with the church state (*The History of the Popes*). Geographically he had so far kept to southern Europe (also with his special study on the Serbian revolution). In the thirties and forties, after the July Revolution, he emphasized the individuality, special features, and tasks of each European nation, in answer, it may be assumed, to the liberal ideas emanating from France. With his publications in the *Historisch-politische Zeitschrift* he tried to stem the flow of these ideas inside Germany. The historical essay on *Die Großen Mächte* dates from this time. His new commitment to German history also arose in this context. Nations were “ideas of God” to him, each having different principles. But that does not mean that Ranke wrote national histories focused only on the political systems of Europe; his national histories had Christian-universal orientations. In this manner, *The History of the Popes* far outgrew its original framework, and the contours were cast for the *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*. In the religious-political reform of the hierarchic order of the Middle Ages Ranke showed the progressive world historical movement. His next project was to be a description of the subsequent world historical change: the French Revolution. He visited the Paris archives but dropped the plan. He had found such an abundance of material on Prussian history that he decided to stay on home ground and render a description of this youngest Great Power, now placed within the larger system of the European states.

In the fifties and sixties, after the 1848 Revolution, Ranke became increasingly disillusioned with the course of history, and with national movements. He turned his interest to following the development of the strong, capable state; constitutionalism and nationalism—inasmuch as they could favorably contribute—had to be worked into the design. He wrote the histories of the two nations which had been both exemplary and dominant in postreformatory times because of closely corresponding but different national formations: French history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and English history of mainly the seventeenth century. Geographically this brought him from southern Europe via Germany to western Europe. It was “world history on national perspectives,” as Krieger wrote; then “world history on a German perspective,” meaning the fragments on German history which Ranke published after 1867 under the impression of the German unification movement; and finally “world history on universal perspectives,” which relates, on the one hand, to a fragment on the French Revolution (*Ursprung und Beginn der Revolutionskriege*) and, on the other, to the *Weltgeschichte* of classical and medieval times, which is the last, unfinished, work of Ranke’s. No doubt, there are some historians who worked with more thematic homogeneity and there are those who worked more heterogeneously, but—despite all the visible cleavages and reorientations—there is no collected work of such

breadth and unity. To this extent, Ranke’s work
faithfully reflects his theme:

modern Europe.

