

Excerpts from writings of **Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886)**



from the Preface to *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494-1514*

The purpose of a historian depends on his point of view and of the latter two things must be said. First, that it regards the Latin and Germanic nations as a unity. ... In the introduction I shall try to show—primarily in the narrative of foreign undertakings—how these nations developed in unity and common enterprise. This is one aspect of the point of view on which this book is based; the other emerges directly from the contents themselves. The book deals with only a small part of the history of these nations, a part which might be considered as the beginning of modern history. But it is only histories, not history. On the one hand, the book comprises the founding of the Spanish monarchy and the destruction of Italian liberty; on the other hand,

it comprises the formation of a double antagonism: a political antagonism originating in France and an ecclesiastical antagonism through the Reformation, in short the division of our nations into two hostile camps upon which all modern history is based.

Beginning with the period in which Italy, still in harmony with itself, enjoyed at least external freedom and, since the pope was there, might perhaps even be called predominant, the book further presents the division of Italy, its invasion by the French and the Spaniards, the destruction of all freedom in some states and of self-determination in others, and finally the victory of the Spaniards and the beginning of their domination. From the political insignificance of the Spanish kingdoms, it proceeds to their unification and the drive of the united kingdoms against the infidels and towards the deepening of the Christian faith. ... Thirdly, the book will describe the fortunes and misfortunes of the French from the time when Charles VIII, as a champion of Christianity, set out against the Turks, until Francis I, forty-one years later, called on the same Turks for help against the emperor. Finally, ... this book tries to pave the way for a more comprehensive historical view of the great schism brought about by the Reformation. ... This book attempts to see these histories and the other, related histories of the Latin and Germanic nations in their unity. 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: It wants only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).

Fragment from the 1830s

There are really only two ways of acquiring knowledge about human affairs: through the perception of the particular, or through abstraction; the latter is the method of philosophy, the former of history. There is no other way, and even revelation comprehends both abstract doctrines and history. One must distinguish clearly between these two sources of knowledge. Nevertheless those historians are also mistaken who consider history simply an immense aggregate of particular facts, which it behooves one to commit to memory. Whence follows the practice of heaping particulars upon particulars, held together only by some general moral principle. I believe rather that the discipline of history—at its highest—is itself called upon, and is able, to lift itself in its own fashion from the investigation and observation of particulars to a universal view of events, to a knowledge of the objectively existing relatedness.

Two qualities, I think, are required for the making of the true historian: first he must feel a participation and pleasure in the particular for itself. If he has a real affection for this human race in all its manifold variety to which we ourselves belong, an affection for this creature that is always the same yet forever different, so good and so evil, so noble and so bestial, so cultured and so brutal, striving for eternity yet enslaved by the moment, so happy and so wretched, content with so little and yet craving so much! If he feels this affection for the living being as such, then he will—without considering the progress of events—enjoy seeing how man has perennially contrived to live. He will readily follow the virtues which man sought, the faults which could be detected in him, his fortune and misfortune, the development of his nature under such diverse conditions, his institutions and his morals, and—so as to encompass everything—also the kings under whom men have lived, the sequence of events, and the development of major enterprises—and all this he will try to follow without any purpose beyond the pleasure in individual life itself. ...

Still, this does not suffice; the historian must keep his eye on the universal aspect of things. He will have no preconceived ideas as does the philosopher; rather, while he reflects on the particular, the development of the world in general will become apparent to him. This development, however, is not related to universal concepts which might have prevailed at one time or another, but to completely different factors. There is no nation on earth that has not had some contact with other nations. It is through this external relationship, which in turn depends on a nation's peculiar character, that the nation enters on the stage of world history, and universal history must therefore focus on it. Some nations on earth were armed with this power before others and these came to exert a preeminent influence on the rest. The transformations which, for better or for worse, the world has experienced, will be seen to have originated chiefly in these nations. Hence we ought not to focus our attention on those general concepts which to some men appear as the dominant forces, but on those nations themselves that have played a preeminent active role in history. We should concern ourselves with the influence which these nations have had on one another, with the struggles they have waged with one another, with their development in peace and war. For it would be completely wrong to see in the struggles of historic powers solely the operation of brute force and thus to seize only upon the ephemeral element of the phenomenon; for no state has ever subsisted without a spiritual base and a spiritual substance. In power itself there appears a spiritual substance, an original genius, which has a life of its own, fulfills conditions more or less peculiar to itself, and creates for itself its own domain. The task of history is the observation of this life which cannot be characterized through One thought or One word; the spirit which manifests itself in the world is not to be so confined; its

presence suffuses the bounds of its existence; nothing is accidental to it, its appearance has its grounds in everything.

Fragment from the 1860s

We must concede that history can never possess the unity of a philosophical system, but it does have an inner connection of its own. We see before us a series of events which follow one another and are conditioned by one another. If I say “conditioned” I certainly do not mean conditioned through absolute necessity. The important point is rather that human freedom makes its appearance everywhere, and the greatest attraction of history lies in the fact that it deals with the scenes of this freedom.

... Freedom and necessity exist side by side. Necessity inheres in all that has already been formed and that cannot be undone, which is the basis of all new, emerging activity. What developed in the past constitutes the connection with what is emerging in the present. But this connection is not something arbitrarily assumed: it existed in a particular way and could be no other. It, too, is a proper object of knowledge. A longer series of concurrent and successive events linked together in such a relationship forms a century, an epoch. The disparity of epochs is due to the fact that the clash gives rise to new ages and new conditions. If we picture this sequence of centuries, each with its unique essence, all linked together, then we shall have attained universal history, from the very beginning to the present day. Universal history comprehends the past life of mankind, not in its particular relations and trends, but in its fullness and totality.

The discipline of universal history differs from specialized research in that universal history, while investigating the particular never loses sight of the complete whole, on which it is working.

The study of particulars, even of a single detail, has its value, if it is done well. Concerned with human affairs, it will always

reveal something of immediate interest; even when dealing with minutiae, it is instructive, since everything human is worth knowing. But this specialized study, too, will always be related to a larger context; even local history will be related to the history of the whole country, a biography to the history of a major event in church and state, to an epoch of national or universal history. But all of these epochs themselves ... belong in turn to the entire whole which we call universal history. The study of these epochs in a wider context is of a correspondingly greater value. The final goal—not yet attained—always remains the conception and composition of a history of mankind. Given the course which historical studies have taken in recent times and which must be continued insofar as history is to produce studies embodying thorough research and precise knowledge, there does exist the danger of losing sight of the universal, of the type of knowledge everyone desires. For history is not simply an academic subject: the knowledge of the history of mankind should be a common property of humanity and should above all benefit our own nation, without which our work could not have been accomplished.

Portrait of Ranke from:

<http://www.deutschlanddokumente.de/Ranke.htm>

Texts taken from *The Varieties of History*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York, rev. ed. 1972), 55-62.

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