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Citation

Paul, H. J. (2023). Labor Ipse Voluptas: virtues of work in Nineteenth-Century Germany. In G. Almási & G. Lizzul (Eds.), *Rethinking the work ethic in premodern Europe* (pp. 311-330). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-38092-1_12

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3665153>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Labor Ipse Voluptas: Virtues of Work in Nineteenth-Century Germany

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Introduction

Hardly had Leopold von Ranke died in May 1886 when one of his former assistants, Theodor Wiedemann, received a letter from a fellow historian inquiring about Ranke's work habits. "Please give me a description of the method of work," he wrote. "Did v. Ranke dictate all his work? How many hours a day could he work?"¹ Wiedemann's answer came in the form of a long series of articles—fifteen installments, published over the course of two years—which offered an intimate portrait of Ranke's daily habits. They described the furniture in Ranke's apartment, the housecoat he preferred to wear, the kinds of meat he liked best, the biscuits he used to devour with his evening tea, and the brand of mineral water that his doctor had advised him to drink.² With equal attention to detail, Wiedemann recounted how Ranke as a man in his eighties had usually structured his day. The fact that he was almost blind at the time made him dependent on assistants, to whom he dictated his letters and chapters and who even helped him carry out his research by reading aloud from books and collections of records.³ While the morning shift, from half past nine until two o'clock, was usually done by a recent graduate, Wiedemann himself did the evening shift, which could last until well after midnight ("occasionally until half past one in the morning"), only interrupted by a fifteen-minute tea break around ten o'clock. Clearly, this was the working schedule of a man blessed with an "extraordinary capacity for work."⁴

Although Wiedemann's articles were singularly detailed, compared to other tributes prompted by Ranke's death (many dozens of lengthy articles, including personal memoirs and obituaries with first-hand recollections about Germany's most illustrious historian), their focus

¹ Quoted in Theodor Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre in der Werkstatt Leopold von Ranke's: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte seiner letzten Lebensjahre [I]," *Deutsche Revue* 16, no. 4 (1891), 164–179, at 165 n. 1. As Wiedemann quoted this letter in English, the inquiry might have come from an American admirer of Ranke.

² Theodor Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre in der Werkstatt Leopold von Ranke's: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte seiner letzten Lebensjahre [II]," *Deutsche Revue* 16, no. 4 (1891), 322–339, at 330.

³ On Ranke's near-blindness, see Heinz Duchhardt, *Blinde Historiker: Erfahrung und Bewältigung von Augenleiden im frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2021), 27–58.

⁴ Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre [II]," 328, 330. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

on his work ethic was far from unique.⁵ If authors did not explicitly mention Ranke's time management skills ("his time was scrupulously regulated"),⁶ they at least marveled at his "never-ceasing creative power" or "astonishing capacity for work," both of which seemed miraculously unimpaired by his limited eyesight and other age-related problems.⁷ Sophie Weisse, the daughter of a former student of Ranke's who had visited the historian just weeks before his death, was one among many who noticed the striking contrast between Ranke's almost emaciated body and his "apparently inexhaustible and indomitable intellect." She recounted how the silver-haired scholar had laughed away her amazement at his appetite for work ("I no longer have anything else to do"). Lest her readers think that Ranke had been busy with small projects, Weisse added that this answer "came from the lips of a man of ninety, engaged with all his might on a gigantic task," namely the writing of a multi-volume world history.⁸ No matter how diverse the chorus of voices commemorating Ranke was, almost everyone shared Wiedemann's and Weisse's fascination for what the otherwise critical Marxist historian Franz Mehring admiringly described as "a capacity and an appetite for work as are granted to only a few elected mortals."⁹

While memoirs like Wiedemann's have received some scholarly attention, most notably from Heinz Duchhardt, who recently devoted an entire book to Ranke's *amanuensis*, historians have typically read these texts with an eye to what they say about Ranke and the manufacturing of his *Weltgeschichte*.¹⁰ This chapter, by contrast, will treat them more broadly as evidence of an obsession with hard work that was characteristic of but certainly not limited to German historians at the time. Drawing on personal, "anecdotal" memoirs, such as those written by Ranke's former assistants and visitors from abroad, this chapter will consider why Ranke's work ethic elicited so much comment and admiration.¹¹ What does this reveal about

⁵ See the list of obituaries (1886–1887) in Günter Johannes Henz, *Leopold von Ranke in Geschichtsdenken und Forschung*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 647–652.

⁶ Alfred Stern, "Ranke: Ein Nachruf," *Die Nation* 3 (1886), 510–513, at 513.

⁷ Georg Winter, "Ranke und die Entstehung seiner Weltgeschichte," *Die Gegenwart* 35 (1889), 84–88, at 85 ("nie ermüdende Schaffenskraft"); H. Simonsfeld, "Leopold v. Ranke [II]," *Beilage zur Allgemeinen Zeitung* (27 March 1889), 1–4, at 3.

⁸ Sophie Weisse, "Leopold von Ranke: Reminiscences of Berlin, 1884–1885," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 140 (1886), 251–258, at 251, 257. I discuss this article at greater length in Herman Paul, "Bloemen voor Leopold von Ranke: naar een cultuurgeschiedenis van de geschiedwetenschap," in *Alles is cultuur: vensters op moderne cultuurgeschiedenis*, ed. Remieg Aerts, Klaas van Berkel, and Babette Hellemans (Hilversum: Verloren, 2018), 164–177.

⁹ [Franz Mehring], "Leopold Ranke," *Volks-Zeitung* (25 May 1886).

¹⁰ Heinz Duchhardt, *Ranques Sekretär: Theodor Wiedemann und die Bücher-Werkstatt des Altmeisters* (Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag, 2021); Günter Johannes Henz, *Leopold von Ranke in Geschichtsdenken und Forschung*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 40–47.

¹¹ Because of this focus on Ranke's work ethic, this chapter will not discuss reminiscences like Herman Wichmann's, which only dealt with Ranke's social life. See Herman Wichmann, "Meine Beziehungen zu Leopold v. Ranke," in Wichmann, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Ries & Erler,

the qualities that historians were supposed to possess and, more generally, notions concerning the virtues of work in nineteenth-century Germany (and beyond)?

Human Interest Stories

It is worth noting that Wiedemann was not the first secretary who, after the death of his employer, offered the curious public a glimpse of the daily habits of a famous German scholar.¹² Intentionally or not, Wiedemann followed the model of Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann and Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski, two former assistants of Immanuel Kant, both of whom had published an intimate portrait of the Königsberg philosopher almost immediately after his death in 1804. With scrupulous attention to detail, their books described the dishes served on Kant's table, the philosopher's habit of smoking one pipe of tobacco a day, the open windows that Kant believed stimulated his health, and the blankets on his bed, in which the philosopher often wrapped himself, as if in a cocoon.¹³ Unsurprisingly, Kant's strictly maintained time schedules received ample attention, too. Wasianski related how Kant's old servant, Martin Lampe, always entered the bedroom precisely at five minutes before five o'clock to wake his master with a loud *Es ist Zeit!*, after which Kant's day would unfold with almost military precision.¹⁴

Following this model, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's testamentary executor, Friedrich von Müller, did not believe his sketch of Goethe's life and character to be complete without an account of his working rhythm. "Time was most precious to him; he knew better than anyone how to use, really to exploit it."¹⁵ Not only did Goethe plan his day meticulously, while using every spare minute; he was also often lost in thought, even interrupting a conversation with a royal visitor to write down a sudden idea for his *Faust* (or so the story went).¹⁶ Alexander von Humboldt, likewise, was posthumously commemorated in a series of publications that paired anecdotes and gossip with recollections and fragments of letters. One such publication quoted Humboldt as saying that he used to work, even at an advanced age,

1887), 167–186 and "Leopold v. Ranke unter Freunden," *ibid.*, 187–206. Paula Quint (Nederlands Muziek Instituut) kindly provided me with a scanned version of these articles.

¹² I am indebted to my research assistant, Caroline Schep, for identifying some of the sources discussed in this section.

¹³ E. A. C. Wasianski, *Immanuel Kant in seine letzten Lebensjahre: Ein Beytrag zur Kenntnis seines Charakters und häuslichen Lebens aus dem täglichen Umgange mit ihm* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1804), 20, 39, 29–30, 32; Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant geschildert in Briefen an einen Freund* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1804), 161–178.

¹⁴ Wasianski, *Immanuel Kant*, 38, 40. See also Ludwig Ernst Borowski, *Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kant's* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1804), 101–103.

¹⁵ Friedrich von Müller, *Goethe in seiner practischen Wirksamkeit: Eine Vorlesung in der Academie Gemeinnütziger Wissenschaften zu Erfurt am 12. September 1832* (Weimar: Wilhelm Hoffmann, [1832]), 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

until two or three o'clock in the morning, after which he slept no more than four hours. This nightly labor was unavoidable, or so the author claimed, given the amount of correspondence that Humboldt had to handle. With some 2,000 outgoing letters per year, Germany's most celebrated scientist was said to spend a fortune of about 500 to 600 thaler annually on postage.¹⁷ Another source added that, shortly before his death, Humboldt had an announcement published in the *Vossische Zeitung* asking the public "not to use my house as an intelligence office," as an endless stream of letters asking for advice distracted him too much from his studies.¹⁸

Although such human interest stories could in principle be written by anyone close to a scholar of some renown, Ranke was one of very few German historians who posthumously received such treatment. Apart from a small, local newspaper article on Heinrich von Sybel's working and eating habits,¹⁹ the only comparable case is that of Theodor Mommsen, the great historian of antiquity, for whom several students published personal "reminiscences" after his death in 1903.²⁰ Arguably, therefore, a first answer to the question as to why Ranke's work habits received so much attention in the press is that he belonged, or was perceived as belonging, to a class of scholars whose fame was such that the general public could be excused for being interested in every detail of their personal lives. This explains not only why Wiedemann's and Winter's memoirs appeared in cultural monthlies, which were intended for broad middle class audiences, but also why Wiedemann felt entitled to dwell on details: "When it comes to great men, one also likes to be instructed about the outward appearances of life, about food and drinks."²¹

Time-Honored Repertoires

This first answer—Ranke was a famous German professor—is a little too general, though, to account for historians' specific interest in Ranke's "methods of work" (*Arbeitsmethode*).²²

¹⁷ [Friedrich Althaus], *Briefwechsel und Gespräche Alexander von Humboldt's mit einem jungen Freunde: Aus dem Jahren 1848 bis 1856* (Berlin: Franz Duncker, 1861), 30, 135, 137.

¹⁸ [Karl Müller], *Blätter der Erinnerung an Alexander von Humboldt* (Berlin: Hasselberg, 1860), 146.

¹⁹ "Aus Heinrich von Sybel's Heim," *Leipziger Tagesblatt* (15 August 1895).

²⁰ [Fritz Jonas], *Erinnerungen an Theodor Mommsen zu seinem hundertjährigen Geburtstage* (Berlin: Trowitsch & Sohn, [1917]); Richard Schöne, *Erinnerungen an Theodor Mommsen zum 30. November 1917*, ed. Hermann Schöne (Münster: Presidium der 54. Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner, 1923). As Hans Kloft has noticed in "Die Nachrufe auf Theodor Mommsen," in *Theodor Mommsen: Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alexander Demandt, Andreas Goltz, and Heinrich Schlange-Schöningh (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 282–317, at 286–287, Mommsen's work ethic was a major theme in the obituaries provoked by his death. In the memorable words of one obituary writer, Mommsen had had the "production output of an entire Academy institute" (*ibid.*, 284).

²¹ Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre [II]," 330.

²² Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre [I]," 165.

Why did they want to know how many hours a day Ranke sat at his desk? Why were they so eager to circulate stories of the kind that Ranke only reluctantly granted his assistants an evening off on Christmas Eve, trying to persuade them year after year to spend that festive evening in his study instead of next to a Christmas tree?²³ This anecdote points to a second explanatory variable. Anecdotes about excessively hard-working scholars have a history of their own. Throughout the ages, scholars have been remembered for prioritizing their work over their health, sacrificing sleep to prepare for their lectures, and neglecting family duties for the sake of finishing a book.²⁴ Many of these tropes, moreover, were repeated across the centuries, especially in memoirs and obituaries. Even if there are no direct precedents to the story of Ranke being surprised that his assistants preferred not to work on Christmas Eve, the anecdote reminds one of cases like that of Guillaume Budé, the French humanist who reportedly managed to work even on his wedding day.²⁵ Historians highlighting Ranke's work habits thus followed a well-established template: they interpreted the historian's life in terms of commonplaces that were often centuries old.

Wiedemann's fascination with Ranke's time schedule is a case in point. In early modern Europe, such schedules were a standard ingredient of scholarly biographies. According to Melchior Adam's *Vitae Germanorum philosophorum* (1615), Philip Melanchthon used to wake up shortly after midnight so that he could do a good deal of writing before breakfast. Martin Crusius, the German classicist, allowed himself to rise much later, at five o'clock, yet continued his studies until ten in the evening.²⁶ A century later, the French *érudit* Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont was said to rise at half past four (or at four o'clock in the season of Lent) to study and pray until lunch, after which he went out for a walk, worked again until seven, and went to bed around half past nine.²⁷ Although the reliability of such stories is difficult to assess, it is clear that they portrayed their protagonists as faithfully following advice of the sort issued by Heinrich Bullinger, among others. To ensure maximum efficient use of time, Bullinger had recommended "fixed hours" for prayer, study, and domestic duties, which were to be "observed strictly" so as not to lose precious time.²⁸ Similarly, Italian humanists like Petrarch

²³ Georg Winter, "Erinnerungen an Leopold von Ranke," *Nord und Süd* 38 (1886), 204–225, at 217.

²⁴ See Dirk van Miert's contribution to this volume.

²⁵ Gábor Almási, "The Work Ethic in Humanist Biographies: The Case of Willem Canter," *Hungarian Historical Review* 8, no. 3 (2019), 594–619, at 614–615.

²⁶ Melchior Adam, *Vitae Germanorum superiori, et quod excurrit, seculo philosophicis et humanioribus literis clarorum*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: s.n., 1615), 200, 492. I would like to thank Dirk van Miert for bringing these passages to my attention.

²⁷ [Michel Tronchay], *Vie de M. Lenain de Tillemont avec des réflexions sur divers sujets de morale, et quelques lettres de piété* (Cologne: s.n., 1711), 24.

²⁸ Heinrich Bullinger, *Studiorum ratio*, ed. Peter Stotz, vol. 1 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), 18. Cf. Max Engammare, *L'ordre du temps: l'invention de la ponctualité au XVI^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2004), 86–89.

had drafted time schedules that allowed for six hours of sleep and two hours of non-work-related duties, thereby leaving sixteen hours per day for concentrated study.²⁹ So when Wiedemann told his readers that Ranke's days were structured around the working sessions with his assistants, he suggested that the historian fitted conventional images of scholarly life at least in one respect: his working rhythm was as unrelenting as it was demanding.

Clearly, Ranke's admirers did not impose these commonplaces on Ranke's biography as if the historian himself were not a factor involved. Ranke had lived out many a *topos*, especially in matters of work ethic. While away for research in Vienna in the 1820s, he had told a friend in detail about his daily schedule (he got up between six and seven, had breakfast with coffee, studied until the library opened at nine, read sources until noon, and so on).³⁰ Likewise, the motto that Ranke had chosen on the occasion of his ennoblement, *labor ipse voluptas* ("labor itself is a pleasure"), drew on ancient models. Whether or not the saying echoed Livy's *labor voluptasque* or Martial's *iuvat ipse labor*,³¹ at least it showed that Ranke had been happy to align himself with early modern scholars such as Isaac Watts, who had suggested *labor ipse voluptas* as an appropriate motto for a life of learning.³² Ranke's assistants were therefore not alone in situating their master in a venerable tradition: Ranke's self-fashioning as a hard-working scholar had drawn on existing repertoires, too.

Nostalgia—or Not?

To what extent did such traditional motifs used in sepia-colored biographical articles convey a sense of Ranke belonging to an age that had come to an end? Is it true that Winter, Wiedemann, and their colleagues were not merely commemorating an old man, born in the eighteenth century,³³ but also a type of scholarly life that was so old-fashioned as to evoke a sense of distance or nostalgia? By the late 1880s, German *Geschichtswissenschaft* had changed substantially compared to the 1820s, when Ranke had published his *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* and received his professorial chair

²⁹ Francesco Petrarca, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, vol. 3 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 195 (*Rerum familiarium libri*, XXI.12).

³⁰ Leopold Ranke to Heinrich Ritter, 28 October 1827, in Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, ed. Walther Peter Fuchs (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1949), 119–123. See also Falko Schnicke, *Die männliche Disziplin: Zur Vergeschlechtlichung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1780–1900* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), 316–337.

³¹ Andreas D. Boldt, *Leopold von Ranke: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 2019), 175–176.

³² I. Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind: or, a Supplement to the Art of Logick: Containing a Variety of Remarks and Rules for the Attainment and Communication of Useful Knowledge, in Religion, in the Sciences, and in common Life* (London: James Brackstone, 1741), 13–14.

³³ So explicitly J. [sic] Jastrow, "Leopold von Ranke †," *Tägliche Rundschau* (28 May 1886), 489–491, at 490.

at Berlin.³⁴ Perhaps the most important development had been the creation of a research infrastructure consisting of journals like the *Historische Zeitschrift*, committees like the Historische Kommission at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (founded at Ranke's initiative), and source editing projects modelled on the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. Insofar as historians were not teaching or supervising students, research institutions like these kept them busy for years on end. While offering employment to a younger generation of scholars, not seldom under conditions that justified analogies between research and factory work, these institutions also made significant demands on senior historians, who had to serve as directors, supervisors, and editors of journals and projects. Given how often scholars in such contexts complained about a chronic lack of time or, more specifically, about their own writing projects suffering under the constant pressure of duties and deadlines,³⁵ one wonders how they looked at Ranke's quasi-solitary monographic work practice. To what extent were their perceptions of Ranke's work ethic imbued with a sense of nostalgia for a time when historians could still write one monograph after another, unhindered by administrative or editorial duties?

Following genre conventions, several obituaries declared that Ranke's death marked the end of an era (a diagnosis that was lent additional credibility by the almost simultaneous death of Georg Waitz, one of Ranke's most influential pupils). Insofar as this caused younger scholars to conceive of themselves as epigones working in the shadow of past masters (another classical literary *topos*), there was a sense in which they looked back with nostalgia on Ranke's generation. Moreover, there had been critics of the "professionalization" and "specialization" of German historical studies before Ranke's death who presented Ranke's seemingly harmonious integration of solid research, political acuteness, and eloquent writing as a historiographical ideal that had become unattainable for a generation that was socialized primarily into an ethos of painstaking historical criticism. Not unlike Heinrich von Treitschke, who ridiculed all "well-educated seminar plants," Alfred Dove (one of Ranke's posthumous

³⁴ See the broad surveys of nineteenth-century German historiography in Matthias Middell, "Germany," in *Atlas of European Historiography: The Making of a Profession*, ed. Ilaria Porciani and Lutz Raphael (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159–166; Daniel Fulda, "History Between Archival Research and Aspirations to Leadership in Society: 19th-Century Germans as Practitioners in History," in *Doing Humanities in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Efraim Podoksik (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 59–82; and Herman Paul, "Historical Studies in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Case of Hartwig Floto," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Human Sciences*, ed. Derrace McCallum (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 207–226.

³⁵ See, e.g., Ludwig Quidde to Ernst Bernheim, 29 September 1882 and 10 July 1883, Ludwig Quidde Collected Papers, box 1, Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Ernst Bernheim to Karl Lamprecht, 2 January 1885, in "Über das eigentliche Arbeitsgebiet der Geschichte": *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Karl Lamprecht und Ernst Bernheim sowie zwischen Karl Lamprecht und Henri Pirenne 1878–1915*, ed. Luise Schorn-Schütte and Mircea Ogrin (Cologne: Böhlau, 2017), 66–67, at 67.

editors) mocked “the narrow philological school of seminars à la Waitz.”³⁶ Similarly, the Munich historian Karl Theodor von Heigel admired Ranke, among others, as a “whole man” (*ganzer Mann*), whose well-rounded character, broad historical interests, and accessible writing style he perceived as healthy antidotes to the modern ills of specialization and one-sided accentuation of source critical problems.³⁷

Notably, however, such nostalgic feelings hardly surfaced in memoirs like Winter’s and Wiedemann’s. With regard to Ranke’s work ethic, none of the recollections consulted for this chapter depicted the historian’s work habits as characteristic of a bygone era.³⁸ Not a single author suggested that Ranke’s generation had worked under different circumstances, that a work ethic like Ranke’s was no longer feasible, or that productivity like his presupposed a freedom to commit oneself to writing projects that had shrunk with the growth of professional duties. Instead, Ranke’s admirers almost without exception attributed the historian’s extraordinary productivity to extraordinary character traits. In a commemorative address to the Bavarian Academy, Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, one of Ranke’s oldest pupils, likely spoke for many when he said:

Someone like him will not soon emerge again. How many and how different are the qualities united in a truly great historian: thoroughness in research, richness and readiness of knowledge, understanding of all the interests of humanity, a sharp gaze that can penetrate into the darkness of far-away centuries, abundance of phantasy and a most lively intuition, combined with a cultivated sense of literary form and inexhaustible appetite and capacity for work. All of this was so harmoniously combined in *Ranke* as happens only rarely in the course of history.³⁹

³⁶ Heinrich von Treitschke to Alfred Dove, 1 September 1873, in Dove, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, ed. Oswald Dammann (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1925), 38–39, at 39; Alfred Dove to Heinrich von Treitschke, 13 May 1873, *ibid.*, 32–35, at 34. I discuss these examples at greater length in Herman Paul, “A Missing Link in the History of Historiography: Scholarly Personae in the World of Alfred Dove,” *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 7 (2019), 1011–1028.

³⁷ Herman Paul, “The Whole Man: A Masculine Persona in German Historical Studies,” in *Gender, Embodiment, and the History of the Scholarly Persona: Incarnations and Contestations*, ed. Kirsti Niskanen and Michael J. Barany (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 261–286.

³⁸ Although Henry Simonsfeld, playing on the theme of Ranke’s blindness, compared him to “a seer and singer from prehistoric times,” the analogy allowed for a picturesque portrait more than that it expressed a sense of nostalgia: “With folded hands, sitting in an armchair, the contemplating, wrinkled head enfolded by thick silver curls, he seems to dictate a chapter of his world history, widely surveying the history of humankind and connecting the near and the far—very much as the rhapsodists of the Ancient world recited Homer’s songs!” Simonsfeld, “Leopold v. Ranke [II],” 4.

³⁹ Wilhelm v[on] Giesebrecht, *Gedächtnissrede auf Leopold von Ranke gehalten in der öffentlichen Sitzung der k. b. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München zur Feier ihres einhundert und achtundzwanzigsten Stiftungstages am 28. März 1887* (Munich: Verlag der k. b. Akademie, 1887), 31–32.

Accordingly, for Giesebrecht and his colleagues, the most relevant variable in explaining Ranke's capacity for work was not his time or the circumstances under which his career had developed, but a personality that they did not hesitate to describe as "genial."

A Man of Genius

The nineteenth-century notion of genius played an important role in the assessments of Ranke's oeuvre and his gifts as a historian, both in the obituaries and in personal recollections.⁴⁰ These writings explicitly referred to "Ranke's genius,"⁴¹ "his genius and his work,"⁴² and his "genial creations,"⁴³ and they drew on notions of genius to account for his work ethic. They did so, however, in different ways. One of Ranke's American admirers, Herbert Baxter Adams, invoked Francis Galton's concept of "hereditary genius" in arguing that Ranke's work ethic had been a matter of inherited traits.⁴⁴ The opening sentence of his article—a piece full of personal anecdotes largely taken from other memoirs—set the tone by stating that "heredity is an important element in the making of great men."⁴⁵ Applying this premise to Ranke's work habits, Adams urged his readers to see Ranke's appetite for work not as an individual trait, but as characteristic of a family that had included several generations of studious pastors:

Men have not yet ceased to marvel at the phenomenon of Leopold von Ranke beginning a history of the world in his eighty-fifth year and continuing the same with unabated mental vigor until past the age of ninety; but that phenomenon has a physical basis laid by generations of long-lived, earnest, intellectual men.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ On notions of genius in Wilhelmine German culture, see Julia Barbara Köhne, "The Cult of Genius in Germany and Austria at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century," in *Genealogies of Genius*, ed. Joyce E. Chaplin and Darrin M. McMahon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115–135.

⁴¹ Georg Winter, "Leopold von Ranke's Max-Vorlesungen," *Nord und Süd* 48 (1889), 120–123, at 123; Winter, "Ranke und die Entstehung seiner Weltgeschichte," 87.

⁴² Weisse, "Leopold von Ranke," 258.

⁴³ Georg Winter, "Leopold von Ranke †," *Protestantische Kirchenzeitung für das evangelische Deutschland* 33 (1886), 489–496, at 493. This article originally appeared in the *Nationalzeitung* (25 May 1886).

⁴⁴ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869). On the American reception of Ranke, see Georg G. Iggers, "The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought," *History and Theory* 2, no. 1 (1962), 17–40 and Dorothy Ross, "On the Misunderstanding of Ranke and the Origins of the Historical Profession in America," in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and James M. Powell (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 154–169.

⁴⁵ [Herbert Baxter Adams], "Leopold von Ranke," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 22 (1886), 542–558, at 542.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 543–544.

Expanding his explanatory scope, Adams even saw national character traits which (in his assessment) had developed over centuries at work in Ranke's *Arbeitszimmer*:

Nothing is so wonderful in the life of Ranke as his persistent, indomitable activity, or what the Germans call "rastlose Thätigkeit"; and yet this tireless energy was but an intensified, highly specialized form of that systematic, almost religious devotion to work and duty which has characterized German pastors since the days of the Reformation.⁴⁷

Interestingly, this emphasis on heredity and environment left little room for the idea that Ranke's work habits could be imitated by others. Adams' interest in Ranke's time schedule ("He worked night and day, Sundays and holidays included") did not stem from a desire to find a universally applicable key to scholarly productivity.⁴⁸ It reflected, rather, a fascination with great men and the conditions enabling "a phenomenon of historical genius" like Ranke's.⁴⁹

Although Wiedemann and Winter, uninfluenced by Galton, approached Ranke's genius from different angles, they too denied that his work habits could serve as a model for others. If "the manifestations of a genius's innate capacity for productivity" emerged from "autonomous freedom and self-determination," as Wiedemann maintained in idealist terms, they could not be forced into "a static scheme" or reduced to a method.⁵⁰ Ranke's genius, in other words, transcended "the ordinary and quotidian," to the point that even Wiedemann, after sixteen years of secretarial assistance, claimed not to grasp the secret of the historian's greatness.⁵¹ His account of Ranke's work habits should therefore not be read as an attempt to unveil that secret. On the contrary, by describing the minutiae of Ranke's everyday life, Wiedemann highlighted the barriers that the aged historian had managed to overcome. Stories about assistants reading source transcriptions (not the most efficient way of doing

⁴⁷ Ibid., 544. On the use of national stereotypes by Adams and other Johns Hopkins University faculty members at the time, see Herman Paul, "German Thoroughness in Baltimore: Epistemic Virtues and National Stereotypes," *History of Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2018), 327–350.

⁴⁸ [Adams], "Leopold von Ranke," 555.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 542. Adams' emphasis on hereditary factors was typical of how he approached "great men" in history. See, e.g., Herbert B. Adams, *The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 61, 126; *Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 15, 37; *The Life and Writings of Jared Sparks: Comprising Selections from His Journals and Correspondence*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1893), 1, 7, 32, 374.

⁵⁰ Theodor Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre in der Werkstatt Leopold von Ranke's: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte seiner letzten Lebensjahre [III]," *Deutsche Revue* 17, no. 1 (1892), 95–102, at 100.

⁵¹ Ibid.

research) and the chaos in Ranke's personal library (which drove many an assistant to despair) helped create a picture of Ranke writing history even under the most unfavorable circumstances.⁵² Similarly, when Winter argued that "knowledge of Ranke's working method in the last and most fruitful epoch of his life contributes to appreciating the greatness of his unique talent to its full extent,"⁵³ he substantiated this claim by contrasting Ranke's "rich mental activity" with the "extraordinary aggravating external circumstances" of near-blindness and dependency on assistants.⁵⁴ The "great obstacles" that Ranke had managed to conquer thus only underscored his genius.⁵⁵

All this points to a third explanation for the fascination that Ranke's work habits elicited. The more difficult the circumstances were under which Ranke had to write, the more remarkable was his achievement of annually bringing out a new tome of his *Weltgeschichte*.⁵⁶ Many a memoir reinforced this message with emotional language, including verbs like *staunen* (to be astonished) and *bewunderen* (to admire),⁵⁷ or with physiognomic descriptions that contrasted Ranke's "feebly animated skeleton" with his "vigorous" mind.⁵⁸ Indeed, it seems as if for Ranke's admirers no anecdote was too trivial to strengthen the notion that Ranke's genius deserved "astonished admiration" (*staunende Bewunderung*).⁵⁹

A Religion of Work

Why, finally, was this genius associated more with quantitative output—long hours in the study, 54 volumes of collected works—than with Ranke's qualitative contributions to historical source criticism or the historiography of Europe's nation states? To a certain degree, this focus may have been genre-specific, as technical accounts of how Ranke had furthered historical scholarship were arguably more at home in learned periodicals than in magazines targeted at non-academic readers. However, even in professional contexts, historians did not cease to marvel at Ranke's devotion to work. Giesebrecht mentioned Ranke's *Genie* and *Arbeitskraft*

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Winter, "Erinnerungen," 208.

⁵⁴ Ibid,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 223.

⁵⁶ Falko Schnicke identifies a similar pattern of reasoning in his "Kranke Historiker: Körperwahrnehmungen und Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Anthropologie* 25, no. 1 (2017), 11–31.

⁵⁷ Winter, "Erinnerungen," 224; Wiedemann, "Sechzehn Jahre [III]," 100; Weisse, "Leopold von Ranke," 255, 256.

⁵⁸ Frederic A. Bancroft, "A Reminiscence of Ranke," *American Historical Association Papers* 3, no. 1 (1888), 121–124, at 122. Similarly: Weisse, "Leopold von Ranke," 251 and P[aul] B[ailleu], "Leopold v. Ranke: Eine persönliche Erinnerung zum hundertsten Geburtstag (21. Dezember 1895)," *Neue Preußische Zeitung* (21 December 1895). On the masculine connotations of this mind-body dualism as applied to scholarly work, see Schnicke, *Männliche Disziplin*, esp. 185–199.

⁵⁹ Georg Winter, "Leopold von Ranke †," 494.

in one and the same breath, whereas Sybel, writing in the country's leading historical journal, claimed that his teacher had died a "hero . . . in the field of labor, in the field of honor."⁶⁰

Did this obsession with work perhaps reflect a culture in which *Wissenschaft* was increasingly equated with *Arbeit*? There are two reasons for raising this question. First, historical research in the course of the nineteenth century was becoming increasingly more labor-intensive, partly because of new sources that were being discovered on an almost a daily basis and partly because of heightened expectations with regard to source coverage and source assessment. Secondly, historians' self-images adapted to these changing working conditions. The idea began to take hold that historians were engaged in what Johann Gustav Droysen called a work of endless proportions, in which the individual author appeared not as an omniscient author, but rather as a modest link in a centuries-long chain of laborers.⁶¹ Although Wolfgang Hardtwig and Falko Schnicke have shown how real these developments were,⁶² the sources featured in this chapter point in a different direction. While emphasizing Ranke's "tireless activity," the memoirs never distance themselves from notions of authorial genius. Although Giesebrecht, for instance, presented Ranke as a model of scholarly labor ("as he labored before our eyes, we ourselves were stimulated to work"),⁶³ he was not prepared to reduce Ranke's labor to mere industry or diligence. As we saw above, capacity for work was but one of the qualities that he deemed necessary for genial performance in matters historical. Ranke's "inexhaustible appetite and capacity for work" were therefore not an alternative to geniality; they were interpreted as evidence of it.

Perhaps more important, therefore, is a fourth and final explanatory variable: the great value that German middle class society attached to virtues of work. As Michael Maurer and others have shown, *Arbeit* was a key value in the moral economy of Germany's educated middle classes.⁶⁴ For those fortunate enough to spend their days at a desk instead of in a factory or on a farm, work was not merely a means of making money, but also a "vocation"

⁶⁰ Giesebrecht, *Gedächtnissrede*, 27; Heinrich v[on] Sybel, "Gedächtnisrede auf Leopold v. Ranke, gehalten in der kgl. preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin am 1. Juli 1886," *Historische Zeitschrift* 56 (1886), 463–481, at 481.

⁶¹ Johann Gustav Droysen, "Historik: Die Vorlesungen von 1857: Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung aus den Handschriften," in Droysen, *Historik*, ed. Peter Leyh, vol. 1 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 1–393, at 63.

⁶² Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion, Wissenschaft als Arbeit, Objektivität: Der Historismus in neuer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), 1–32, at 26–27; Schnicke, *Männliche Disziplin*, 271–288.

⁶³ Giesebrecht, *Gedächtnissrede*, 14.

⁶⁴ On the broader German discourse on "work" in an age of industrialization, see Joan Campbell, *Joy in Work, German Work: The National Debate, 1800–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

(*Beruf*).⁶⁵ This implied not only that the demands of work were more sacrosanct than other demands, but also that the meaning or purpose of a man's life (women's lives were a different matter) could be realized through work. This was either because work was religiously interpreted as a divine command or because it was seen as a means to what idealist philosophers used to call "self-actualization."⁶⁶ Because of this high value placed on work, Maurer argues that work had an inextricably religious subtext, to the point of sometimes serving as a *Religionsersatz* (work taking the place formerly reserved for religion).⁶⁷

Given this quasi-religious significance of work, not only among writers and scholars but also among teachers and civil servants, it should come as no surprise that several of the scholarly habits referred to in previous sections had equivalents outside of the academic realm. Time schedules, for instance, were not merely the prerogative of scholars: merchants and medical doctors also used them to maximize their time efficiency.⁶⁸ Rising before dawn and working into the early hours, too, were habits known outside the circles of professors and students. There are stories about princes, lawyers, and civil servants who did not retire to bed before two in the morning.⁶⁹ Similarly, there are anecdotes about pastors who tried to save time by skipping meals or who managed to prepare a sermon during their morning toilet.⁷⁰ Also, there is no lack of biographical vignettes about civil servants who outperformed their peers in terms of the number of records they managed to process or about mayors who acquired a reputation for issuing huge numbers of legal verdicts.⁷¹ What these examples show is that virtues of work (industry, diligence, loyalty, perseverance) were valued highly in and beyond German middle class society, even to such an extent that Herbert Baxter Adams could interpret them as national character traits.⁷²

In this context, the significance of Ranke's devotion to work—"a kind of religious mission," in Paul Bailleu's apt phrasing—far exceeded the realm of historical research.⁷³

⁶⁵ On this notion, richly imbued with Lutheran theological connotations, see also Anthony J. La Vopa, "Vocations, Careers, and Talent: Lutheran Pietism and Sponsored Mobility in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 2 (1986), 255–286.

⁶⁶ Michael Maurer, *Die Biographie des Bürgers: Lebensformen und Denkweisen in der formativen Phase des deutschen Bürgertums (1680–1815)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 382–387.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 409–410.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 406–407.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 409–411.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁷² Dieter Hein, "Arbeit, Fleiß und Ordnung," in *Bürgerliche Werte um 1800: Entwurf, Vermittlung, Rezeption*, ed. Hans-Werner Hahn and Dieter Hein (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005), 239–251; Rudolf Schenda, "Die Verfleißigung der Deutschen: Materialien zur Indoktrination eines Tugend-Bündels," in *Volkskultur in der Moderne: Probleme und Perspektiven empirischer Kulturforschung*, ed. Utz Jeggle et al. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986), 88–108.

⁷³ B[aillieu], "Leopold v. Ranke."

Ranke's productivity served a source of pride, even to people who would never buy a copy of the *Geschichte der Päpste*. As Ranke's son Friduhelm, a high-ranking military officer, declared after his father's death, "All Germany was proud of the man who in extreme old age produced such a work."⁷⁴ In his Bavarian address, Giesebrecht likewise observed that Ranke's "name was on everyone's lips; the nation was proud that the era's most important historian was one of them."⁷⁵ What this shows is that Ranke was celebrated not primarily as a scholar who had excelled in his field of study, but as a German citizen who had demonstrated exemplarily what it meant to find joy in labor (*labor ipse voluptas*) and to devote one's talents, as his son wrote, to "that noblest ingredient of existence, work—absorbing, all-engrossing work."⁷⁶ In turn, this explains why both Weisse and Adams could end their memoirs with paraphrased lines from Goethe's poem, "Das Göttliche" (1783), according to which the "noble man" is "generous and good / tirelessly achieving / what is just and useful," thereby providing a "model" for the rest of society.⁷⁷ Insofar as Ranke was identified with this noble worker as hailed by Germany's greatest poet, he transcended the historical profession and became an almost superhuman embodiment of virtues valued in German society at large.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Clearly, then, there is more than one answer to the question as to why Ranke's work ethic was such a central theme in memoirs written after his death. This chapter has identified four relevant explanatory variables: human interest in the daily habits of a famous professor; time-honored commonplaces about hard-working scholars that both Ranke and his admirers were eager to appropriate; nineteenth-century notions of genius that saw the historian's greatness manifested in a heroic overcoming of physical limitations; and a general middle-class culture which attached extraordinary value to virtues of work. In addition, the chapter has argued that there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate convincingly that Wiedemann *cum suis* were nostalgic for a time in which historians enjoyed sufficient freedom to write books like Ranke's, much as it is implausible to read their memoirs as reflecting a nineteenth-century understanding of *Wissenschaft* as *Arbeit*. These reminiscences of Ranke are better interpreted

⁷⁴ Friduhelm von Ranke, "Reminiscences of Leopold von Ranke," *Temple Bar* 1, no. 3 (1906), 193–215, at 214.

⁷⁵ Giesebrecht, *Gedächtnissrede*, 28.

⁷⁶ Friduhelm von Ranke, "Reminiscences," 193.

⁷⁷ Weisse, "Leopold von Ranke," 258; [Adams], "Leopold von Ranke," 558; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Das Göttliche," in *Goethe's Schriften*, vol. 8 (Leipzig: Georg Joachim Göschen, 1789), 215–218, at 218.

⁷⁸ On such larger-than-life features attributed to academic heroes, see Valilios N. Makrides, "Akademische Irrationalismen? Kulte um Personen in wissenschaftlich-akademischen Kreisen," in *Gelehrtenleben: Wissenschaftspraxis in der Neuzeit*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Reiner Prass (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), 261–278, at 271.

as reflecting broad cultural value systems than as mirroring dynamics specific to the discipline of history.

From a *longue durée* historical perspective, finally, the sources featured in this chapter point to the persistence of early modern repertoires, specifically with regard to virtues of work and habits in which such virtues were believed to flourish. Although the standards of virtue to which nineteenth-century historians were committed from those propagated at a time when treatises on academic conduct warned primarily against pride, vainglory, and futile quarreling (*logomachia*),⁷⁹ admiration for hard work was something that Ranke's contemporaries shared with men of learning in sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century Europe. Even if they justified this admiration on different grounds, practices like keeping time schedules and working until after midnight were no more common in the nineteenth century as they had been in earlier times. Likewise, a heroization of personal sacrifice, premised on the assumption that devotion to the life of the mind is evidenced by suppression of bodily needs or transcendence of physical limitations, can be found in nineteenth-century memoirs and obituaries just as frequently as in biographies of early modern men of learning. Apparently, even in an age that witnessed major transformations in academic research and teaching, not to mention great changes in society at large, early modern commonplaces regarding the virtue of work still resonated among academic and non-academic authors alike.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Sari Kivistö, *The Vices of Learning: Morality and Knowledge at Early Modern Universities* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁸⁰ This chapter emerges out of the research project "Scholarly Vices: A Longue Durée History" based at Leiden University. I am indebted to Dirk van Miert for several conversations about the theme of this chapter, to the participants in the Innsbruck workshop (July 2021) for invaluable feedback, and to Falko Schnicke and the editors of this volume for helpful comments on a draft of the text. Funding was generously provided by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).