

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 11
 Birth, Death, and Regeneration:
 Giessen University, 1700-1815

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 Giessen, Germany
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
 Institute of Current World Affairs
 522 Fifth Avenue
 New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Germans have a rough equivalent to our expression, "Living the life of Reilley." Their version is: "Er lebt wie Gott in Frankreich", (He lives like God in France). A newer variant is "to live like the Boches in France," which stems from the World War. Both expressions bring to the German mind visions of delicious wines, Elysian landscapes, and succulent maidens. Although there is no reliable authority for this, it's a good bet the earlier version comes from the 18th century.

For this was the century of Enlightenment. And as far as Germany was concerned, the enlightenment came from across the Rhine. It was the century of the extravagant Louies: Quatorze, Quinze, and Seize; the century in which a Prussian king preferred the delicate language of Voltaire to his own stiff tongue. And Germany's proper young men took lessons from a French dancing master.

The 18th century at the University of Giessen might well be called the French Era. One could even widen the focus of the description to include all Germany.

Along the walls of the new faculty council room at Giessen are rows and rows of portraits - 108 of them. They constitute the "Professors Gallery", a unique collection of academic visages representing nearly every scholar who taught here from 1629 to 1780. The professors had been ordered by the Landgraf to get themselves painted.

One striking aspect of the collection is the change in faces and clothing between the portraits of the 17th century and those of the 18th.

The 17th century Giessen professors seem a somber and adamant lot. Their eyes are keen and penetrating, their brows deeply furrowed. The severe black of their clothing is relieved only by a dash of white - the collar at the throat. The theologians clasp their bibles to their breasts as though they were weapons.

In gaudy contrast to this grim-faced group are the professors of the 18th century. These are clad in crimson velvet, blue silk, and gold lapels. Luxuriant periwigs frame their plump and almost insipid faces. Their complexions are pink, their lips deeply colored. No worry-lines crease their foreheads.



The Giessen University seal

Whence came all this chromatic finery? From France.

Little more than half the century had passed when Giessen felt the French influence in a rougher fashion: French troops came trumpeting through on their way to various battles in the Seven Years War. In 1758, the French commandeered the university's main building, which they used as a military hospital for the next four years. From then on, until Napoleon's decline, French soldiers were frequent visitors in Giessen.

Before all this took place, however, the little university was progressing slowly in the arts and sciences. Medical studies took an upswing - so much so that the university senate was obliged to issue a decree in 1719 banning medical students from practicing on their sick classmates. The next year, an anatomical institute was built - the university's second building.

Pietism, which had brought students flocking to Giessen in the 1690's, found another home at the university of Halle. As a result, the number of new students enrolling at Giessen sank considerably. From a high of nearly 300 students in 1707, the enrollment dropped to little over a hundred in the Seven Years War (1756-1763).

The Giessen theologians became known for their rigid orthodoxy once again, and the pall of piety hung heavy over Upper Hesse. An example of this gloomy mood was the dismissal of Professor Jakob Friedrich Mueller in 1744. Professor Mueller, who lectured on logic and metaphysics, was fired because he neglected to attend local worship services for several years. His absence was found conspicuous.

But the law faculty gained in prominence under professors like Melchior Dethmar Grolmann. The father of Johann Wolfgang Goethe received his doctorate of law at Giessen in 1738. Later the son visited Giessen to meet with the law professor, Ludwig Julius Höpfer, who taught here from 1771 to 1781. But young Goethe didn't stay long.



Melchior Grolmann in some chromatic finery, (French)

The second half of the century was a period of "firsts" for the university. The first chemical laboratory was built in 1767. In 1769 the first lectures on agricultural science were given. Lectures on forestry science followed in 1788. English was taught for the first time under the auspices of the philosophy faculty in 1770. By 1780, the philosophy faculty had lost its original propaedeutic character, and it achieved equal status with the other faculties. Lectures on veterinary science were begun in 1778.

The theological faculty had a curious member during the 1770's - Karl Friedrich Bahrdt. He was regarded by some of his colleagues as an academic con-man. Apparently, Bahrdt was a gifted and clever creature, but not very well-liked. He visited Goethe in Frankfurt and afterwards the poet wrote: "If his heart were as good as his genius is great, how fraternal we would feel towards him." Bahrdt ended a strange career as a tavernkeeper at Halle in 1792, leaving behind him a 1451-page autobiography.

Here are some of Bahrdt's observations about the Giessen of his day: "The area itself certainly has nothing charming about it. Giessen is a small town in which one finds scarcely a dozen pretty and modern houses. No street is straight. Dungheaps lie before the houses . . . The city walls are higher than most of the houses, and therefore the town seems as if buried behind them, causing a lack of free circulation of air, many stenches and unhealthy vapors."

The Landgraf at this time was Ludwig IX. An enlightened monarch, he conceived a profound sympathy for the ideas of the French physiocrats. He was impressed with the writings of Francois Quesnay, the physician of the French king. A part-time economist, Quesnay insisted that society should be governed in accord with natural order, that government was a necessary evil, and that individual rights should be limited only insofar as they infringe on the rights of others.

Ludwig IX talked over these ideas with his minister, Friedrich Carl Moser and then ordered him to form a commission "to make the work of my industrious subjects more fruitful and their lives happier . . ." One of Moser's first actions along this line was to establish a fifth faculty at Giessen University - for the teaching of economics. The faculty was opened in 1777. Among the subjects offered were national economy, technology, veterinary science, and agricultural science.

The dean of this faculty was the outstanding German physiocrat, Johannes Schlettwein. The dean was dismissed in 1785 ostensibly because he had made some "careless" remarks in one of his books. As far as Schlettwein was concerned, Giessen's physiocrats apparently weren't willing to "laissez faire, laissez passer."

Although the economics faculty fell apart after the firing of its dean, Schlettwein nevertheless had a successor at Giessen. He was Professor August Friedrich Wilhelm Crome, who began lecturing in 1785 on economics, political science, and finance.

Crome was a magnetic character in his first years at Giessen. Two years after he arrived, 20 young women enrolled in his class on political science. Their motive for attending the lectures is not clear, but they appear to be the first female students in the university's history.

Meanwhile, the political constellations were shifting. Three years after the storming of the Bastille, troops of the new French Republic marched into Giessen.

By this time, the juices of nationalism had begun to work in Giessen's students. There were clashes between soldiers and students on July 24, 1792. During the fall, the French troops reoccupied the university's main building. In 1796, Giessen students scuffled with the French troops again.

Professor Crome was a brassbound Francophile and a Gallican smooth diplomat to boot. In 1797, it looked as though the occupying French were going to swallow up the university completely. Through skilful negotiations with the French military governor, General Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, Crome was able to protect the university from French incursions. He is credited especially with saving the university library, which Ludwig V had begun. Giessen showed its gratitude to Bernadotte on December 16, 1797, by staging a torch-light parade for him. At Crome's instance, the university awarded the general an honorary doctorate the next day - a subtle gesture.

The thing that made Crome important in the history of the university was his impassioned advocacy of the Napoleonic cause. For this economist was up against a current of nationalist feeling which had been growing at the university for years among both students and professors.

In fact the universities were primary carriers of the nationalist germ. The German tradition of the wandering student which had begun in the Middle Ages was still strong. This held true for professors too. As a rule, both groups studied and taught at several or more universities. As a result, the Hessian of Giessen came to know Saxons at Halle, the Silesians of Breslau, and the Badenens of Freiburg - and vice versa. The learned to cherish mutual "German" aims despite the countless state boundaries which separated them.

Another element contributing to the growth of nationalism was the German language. For centuries it had been alien to the academic community. Lectures, theses, and even some family names were Latinized. In the 17th century, professors like Schupp at Giessen (see DB - 10) and Christian Thomasius at Leipzig began writing and lecturing in the German language. This caught on more and more in the 18th century.

Thus nationalist sentiment - another French import - caught fire in the German universities before it reached other segments of the population.

Against this foreboding element, the star of Professor Crome shown brightly. Shortly after the 19th century dawned he became the major political and economic theorist of the Rheinbund, the Confederation of the Rhine, which Napoleon Bonaparte had formed with the treaty of Campo Formio in 1797. This conglomeration of more than a hundred petty German principalities served only to fertilize the seed of nationalism.

In the case of Giessen, Crome's allegiance to Napoleon and French absolutism incited the students the more. Crome himself became a bitter enemy of Germanism. He called it "a swindle" and said it was "only madness to oppose the great hero, Napoleon." The nationalists were "pitiful imbeciles" who were leading the fatherland into imperceptible misery."

For the time being, Crome had an amicus curiae in the Hessian count, Ludwig X, whom Napoleon had bought by raising him to the title of grand duke.

Of course there were other things going on at Giessen University besides the career of Professor Crome. In 1800, Baron Karl von Senckenberg, a wealthy Hessian noble, opened his library of 9,000 volumes (including many valuable manuscripts) to the city. This collection was later added to the University Library.

About this time, another curious figure was active on the periphery of the university. Friedrich Pilger, a native of nearby Wetzlar, was a retired army captain. Landing in Giessen about 1800, he set up practice as an animal doctor. Soon he was taking on students from the medical faculty. As Pilger was still parading around with his title of captain, the regime ordered him to become merely "Herr" Pilger. The veteran was piqued. He replied by demanding a room at the university for his "veterinary" classes. Refusing this, the regime consoled Pilger by naming him professor of veterinary medicine. This outraged the Giessen faculty, who regarded Pilger as an upstart charlatan and noted that he had never attained an academic degree. The Hessian regime explained that the professorship was only "titular". Pilger left Giessen with his title in 1804. Two years later he received an offer of a professorship at the University of Kharkev. When last heard of, Giessen's first practicing veterinarian was doctoring up Russian humans as well as animals. It was not an auspicious beginning for veterinary medicine, which was to become one of the most powerful faculties in the 20th century.

Meanwhile, the second occupation of Giessen by the French was having its effects. In 1806, the philosophy faculty's auditorium was turned into a hayloft for the cavalry. A year later, a Giessen student aimed a bullet at the noggin of the French city commandant, narrowly missing him. It was feared the occupiers would close up the university, but this was averted. The student was locked up in the university's brand new Karzer (student jail).

The restive political atmosphere apparently had other effects; the number of students enrolled at Giessen sank once more to little more than a hundred.

In 1809, the philosophy faculty again assumed its earlier role as ambassador of general education. A decree made it obligatory for all students of medicine, law, and theology to hear philosophy faculty lectures on logic, psychology, pure mathematics, and history. This same year, a professorship in Greek literature and archeology was created. The scholar who assumed this chair, the first of its kind in all Germany, was Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker. He was soon to act as Giessen's nationalist counterpoise to Professor Crome.

The year 1809 was a decisive one in the history of German universities - in fact for universities all over the world. For it was during this year that 42-year-old Wilhelm von Humboldt was appointed head of the section for culture and teaching in the Prussian Ministry of Interior at Berlin.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the brother of the brilliant natural scientist, Alexander, was a philologist and a diplomat. He held the Prussian educational post for only one year. Yet within the space of those 12 months, he wrought a fundamental change in the shape of the German university.



Wilhelm von Humboldt
"Only one year."

In the neoclassicist, humanist tradition of his age, it was Humboldt's theory that the university should devote itself to two goals: Teaching and Research (Lehre und Forschung). Moreover, he asserted, university professors should be left free to pursue these goals - free from state interference, free from extra-curricular demands on their time, free to teach and to do research the way they wanted.

During his brief term of office, Humboldt managed to impose some of these principles upon the new University of Berlin. It was a noble piece of work; for the Humboldt model soon became the prototype for all German universities, and to some degree for American universities. It was to liberate the German schools from bootlicking academic subservience to their princely "protectors". It was to bring German science to its richest flowering.

Humboldt left his ministerial post in 1810 because he felt his freedom of action was too restricted by the Government.

Before the Humboldtian principles were to take effect in Giessen, the university had to settle with the French. By 1813, the Napoleonic wars had stirred up even more nationalist feeling in Giessen. New student enrollment sank that year to 32. The old students were getting itchy. But then the French troops pulled out of Giessen, and the German War of Liberation began.

In November, 1813, General Bluecher entered Giessen with his Prussian army. The excited university students celebrated his arrival with a gigantic party. The honor guest, a man not known for verbosity, told them: "Gut Deutsch oder am Galgen!" (-be- Good Germans or to the gallows). Bluecher marched out on his way to Waterloo. The students then petitioned the Hessian grand duke to be allowed to take part in Germany's battle for liberation.

In answer to their request, the Hessian monarch issued the following decree:

"To the battle for fatherland and freedom! It is now our highest wish that a Hessian Freecorps march forth in the cause of justice, God's cause, the holy war against Germany's oppressors; to prove that German virtue still lives in the hearts of Germans."

During the winter of 1813-14, the Giessen students formed a volunteer company. Their leader was Professor Welcker. In March, 1814, the troop marched out of Giessen to do battle with the French. The student-soldiers marched all the way to Lyons, France without tasting a drop of Gallic blood. Then they turned around and marched back again - "victorious".

Another year passed before Napoleon was given his final drubbing. However, French troops were gone for good from Giessen. In fact, foreign soldiers were not to use this town for a roadstead for another 130 years.

In 1815, that victim of enthusiasm, Professor Crome, returned to his professorship in Giessen. The students, among them the veterans of the march to Lyons, boycotted his lectures. The faculty tried to get rid of Crome without success. But that didn't matter much; the French Era at Giessen was over.

David Binder

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