

## The history of the University of Giessen ...

... in a little more than 1607 words



Justus Liebig University Giessen has a varied history. In the course of more than 400 years since its founding in 1607, the university in Giessen has grown from a small state university to a full-scale university with a broad range of study programmes and various fields of excellence. On more than one occasion over the years it has proved able to pull through a crisis and to reassert itself. It has ultimately emerged stronger than before from various periods of crisis. Over the centuries it has produced a number of outstanding personae. After the university's turbulent beginnings in the 17th century, its stabilisation and establishment as a small state university in the 18th century, it entered a period of modernisation and began to adopt an international outlook in the 19th century. Further crises awaited it, however, in the 20th century. Today, in the fifth century of its existence, Justus Liebig University is a high-performance university that is fit for the future.

### The 17th and 18th centuries: early ups and downs and stabilisation of the university

The university in Giessen got off to a stormy start in the 17th century. In 1607 Landgrave Ludwig V of Hesse-Darmstadt founded a Protestant state university in Giessen. In the course of the Thirty Years War, Marburg was occupied by troops from Hesse-Darmstadt and the state university was relocated to Marburg in 1625.

It was not until after the Peace of Westphalia in 1650 that the university was transferred back to Giessen. In the 17th and 18th centuries the Ludoviciana (named after its founder, Landgrave Ludwig V) was considered a typical small Protestant state university. It had some 20 professors. As was customary at the time, it had four faculties: Theology, Jurisprudence, Medicine and Philosophy.

For a few years at the end of the 18th century (1777-1785), there was a fifth faculty in Giessen, the first Faculty of Economics ever established at a German-speaking university.



### The 19th century: pioneering research achievements and international orientation

Nineteenth century scholars at the Ludoviciana played a significant role in major inventions. One of them was Justus Liebig, the founder of modern, practice-oriented knowledge transfer methods in chemistry and related scientific subjects, the developer of artificial fertiliser, meat extract and baking powder and the scholar after whom the university was later named. In 1824 Justus Liebig was appointed Professor of Chemistry at the University of Giessen, where he engaged intensely in organic chemistry research.

From the late 1830s onwards he shifted the focus of his research to the field of physiological chemistry, to analyses of the metabolism of plants and animals. Liebig's scholarly success was based on research and analyses conducted in the chemical laboratories in Giessen, the first place where empirical research in the natural sciences was carried out on a grand scale in Germany. The teaching style developed by Liebig,

who put ideas about the indivisibility of research and teaching into practice, was to set the standard for university education in the natural sciences worldwide. The tremendous teaching success attracted more and more students to Giessen, even from abroad.

Giessen's central location and, not least, the early railway connection, established in 1849/50, also helped to forge links between the university and scholars and universities throughout Europe. Beyond his field of scholarship, Liebig was constantly endeavouring to spread his ideas and to make chemistry more popular.

He skilfully exploited the tools of journalism for his purposes – for instance, through his “Chemische Briefe” (Chemical Letters), which he



Justus Liebig

published in the Augsburg Allgemeine newspaper and which were promptly translated by his students. He also played an active role in university and science policy matters.

Owing to his excellent reputation as a scholar, Liebig was able to chalk up astounding successes in those areas, too. He made a substantial contribution to ensuring general public recognition of modern research in the natural sciences and to establishing that research at the universities.

At the same time, from the 1830s onwards the “young” sciences such as veterinary medicine, agricultural science, forestry and administrative sciences were beginning to grow in popularity, which led to new



Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen

subjects being introduced at Giessen for which the university is still famed today.

Apart from Liebig, the University of Giessen employed a number of other scholarly pioneers, including the German linguist Otto Behaghel, the legal scholar Rudolf von Jhering, the theologian Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (who discovered X-rays and won the first Nobel Prize for Physics), the psychiatrist Robert Sommer, the psychologist Kurt Koffka and the archaeologist and philologist Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker.

### The 20th century: existential crises in the First and Second World Wars



In 1902 student numbers exceeded the 1,000 mark for the first time; the first women were admitted in 1908. However, the First World War put a sudden end to the university's successful development.

Many university members died at the front. It was difficult to keep the teaching activities going. In the 1920s the Ludoviciana began to put the pieces

back together but came under existential pressure in the new People's State of Hesse in the latter days of the Weimar Republic because of increasingly difficult economic circumstances.

As the Weimar Republic drew to an end, members of the university were among those who hoped that National Socialism would bring about an improvement in their situation and in that of the university. National Socialism proved very popular among the students and associate professors at Ludwig's University, some of whom were feeling the material pinch caused by the economic crisis in the Weimar Republic particularly acutely. Many professors were also clearly sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

From 1931 onwards, the National Socialists were in the majority among the members of the university. Two years later, the start of the semester was celebrated in the “New Empire” as part of the “Great National Declaration of the University”. The university dismissed its Jewish and politically unwelcome students and teachers. New subjects with a marked National Socialist ideological orientation, such as heredita-

ry and racial hygiene, were introduced at the university. Forced sterilisation of Jews and other “undesirable” groups of people was carried out in the clinics.

By and large, the political instrumentalisation of the university met with no protest or resistance. One of the few who held undeterred to their anti-National Socialist stance was the emeritus theologian Gustav Krüger, who spoke out publicly in 1933 against the evident quashing of academic freedom.

The discrimination of Jews was intensified further from 1935 onwards and was extended to “Jewish mongrels”. From 1935 onwards there is evidence of a total of 51 legal proceedings to withdraw doctoral degrees from Jewish graduates in particular.



The university was determined to ostracise those of its members who were of the Jewish faith. There was not even any hesitation about informing those in power of where they were staying.

The Second World War brought all teaching virtually to a standstill. Teachers and students had to go to the front. Research important to the war effort was outsourced.

Two bomb attacks in December 1944 destroyed large parts of Giessen's inner city area and the university. The university seemed to be at an end.

### Coming to terms with the National Socialist past

Like almost all other German universities, the University of Giessen found it difficult to come to terms with its share in the Nazi persecutions of the Jews. In 1982, on the occasion of the 375th anniversary of the university's founding, the first studies were published.

At the turn of the millennium, the university took public steps to deal with its past in the National Socialist era. It rehabilitated

those who had had their doctoral degrees withdrawn and in February 2006 published an official statement on the matter. In the Academic Ceremony in November 2008 the university presented a commemorative plaque in honour of the rehabilitated scholars to the public and placed it in the Gustav Krüger Hall.

Justus Liebig University thus accepts its responsibility for the harm done in the 1930s and 1940s and takes steps to ensure that such acts of ostracism and persecution will never recur.

### Growth and democratisation in the post-war period

In 1946 the university was only able to reopen as the Justus Liebig University for Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine at first, offering the subjects of agricultural science and veterinary medicine and the main natural sciences.



As a result of the Act on the Establishment of Justus Liebig University initiated by the Hessian Minister of Cultural Affairs Erwin Stein, in 1950 it was expanded into a biological and technical university, a new type of higher education institution in the federal state of Hesse.

That law, the first of its kind in the history of German universities, set out, on the one hand, to strengthen the influence of the democratic legislator on university activities and, on the other, to firmly establish student participation in the university's own management. It thus contained Erwin Stein's answer to the failure of the universities under National Socialism.

In 1957 Justus Liebig University once again became a comprehensive university. The subjects in the humanities and social sciences as well as in law and economics that had been lost in 1946 were reinstated in their own faculties. Teacher training was added as a new component, which has since become an important focus of the university.

For the first time, women were appointed as full professors – in 1919, during the Weimar Republic, Margarete Bieber had been the first woman to be habilitated and subsequently to be appointed as an associate professor.

Women, too, were thus able to hold influential academic positions at Justus Liebig University. Among them were the sociologist Helge Pross, who included women's and gender issues in her field of scholarship, and the botanist Lore Steubing, who can be considered one of Germany's pioneers in ecology.

All universities in the German Federal Republic were subject to student protests in the 1960s – and Giessen was no exception. Like Georg Büchner in the 1830s, who is probably the best known of University of Giessen's students, the students articulated their political convictions and created new forms of political protest, such as mass demonstrations and "sit-ins" against the Vietnam War.



The student protests in the late 1960s helped to pave the way for the introduction of university regulations that gave all members an opportunity to be involved in their internal election and decision-making processes.

From 1974 onwards, the University of Giessen's broad range of subjects and its strongly research oriented disciplines contributed to its becoming the second largest university in Hesse.

Its clear internationalisation strategy helped to establish its reputation. Drawing on decades of tradition, Justus Liebig University with



its Giessen Centre for Eastern European Studies and the Centre for International Development and Environment Research bundles research and teaching on Eastern Europe (and Central Asia) in Hesse. The university also has many agreements that provide exchange opportunities for students and academics worldwide. Examples include the long-standing relationship with the universities in Lodz (Poland) and Kazan (Russia) and – as part of Hessian state partnerships – with the universities in Wisconsin (USA) and Bursa (Turkey). Justus Liebig University also cooperates with very strongly research oriented universities worldwide – in medicine, for example, with Imperial College London (United Kingdom) and Monash University (Australia).

### Justus Liebig University today

In 2013 Justus Liebig University is in a period of major developmental momentum. With its 26,000 students it substantially contributes to making Giessen the town with the highest student ratio in the whole of Germany.

Apart from an extensive array of study programmes, it offers a range of life sciences, including human medicine, veterinary medicine, agriculture, environmental studies, nutritional sciences and the natural sciences, that is unique not only in Hesse but also in Germany. It is a vital basis for successful, interdisciplinary and externally funded research.

In the humanities and cultural sciences, its second major area of focus, the University of Giessen also has gained an outstanding reputation, among other things with its pioneering role in supporting postgraduate education. With its forward-looking concept "Translating Science" the university carries on the tradition established by Liebig: true to its motto, "Study life – explore the world", excellent basic research, socially relevant application, the exploitation of interdisciplinary synergies, support for outstanding next generation scholars, first-class quality teaching and an international orientation define Justus Liebig University in the 21st century.

With this view of scholarship, Justus Liebig University Giessen is well equipped for the future.



**JLU** STUDY LIFE  
EXPLORE THE WORLD

Justus Liebig University Giessen  
The President  
Ludwigstrasse 23  
35390 Giessen  
www.uni-giessen.de

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