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The History of the University of Jena 1850-1995

Historians of the University of Jena Present New Book on the History of Their Alma Mater

In the course of its 450-year history, the University of Jena has seen many highlights as well as dark chapters. Since 1999, the "Senatskommission zur Aufarbeitung der Jenaer Universitaetsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert" (Senate Committee for the Reappraisal of the History of the University of Jena in the Twentieth Century) has been researching and reappraising the university's eventful recent history. The volume "Traditionen - Brüche - Wandlungen" (Traditions - Disruptions - Metamorphoses. The University of Jena from 1850 to 1995), first presented to the public on 9 March, is the direct result of these efforts and aims at specialist readers as well as interested laymen.

"Our aim was to create a landmark with long term significance," comments the historian Prof. Dr. Jürgen John, who is one of the authors. Co-author Dr. Heinz Mestrup points out that it is not an "eulogy", but rather a critical re-assessment of the "long 20th century". Although the book marks the conclusion of the work of the Senate Committee, it is far more than a summary of its research which lasted more than a decade. The new volume comprises three chapters written by Stefan Gerber, Jürgen John/Rüdiger Stutz, Tobias Kaiser/Heinz Mestrup and Michael Ploenus, respectively.

The first chapter, covering the period from 1850 to World War I, focuses on how the university changed into a modern research and service-oriented university in response, as Dr. Tobias Kaiser points out, to the demands of modern society. His colleague Dr. Stefan Gerber adds that the chapter is not only about Jena: "We investigated the history of science and academia and the area of tension between politics and the public". Although not every department is discussed in detail, the authors present the key events and figures.

The second chapter concentrates on the period from 1918 to 1945. Prof. Dr. Jürgen John and Dr. Rüdiger Stutz, the two authors of the chapter, comment: "We revise the wrong and misleading impression of a seemingly permanent crisis of sciences and humanities during the Weimar Republic. In fact, we focus on the innovations of the early Weimar Period and the mid-1920s with the 'newly distinguished university'."

This can be seen best in the period from 1921 until 1923/24, which was marked by reform and conflict, and the chapter also discusses the turning point of 1933, and the disruptions connected with the "enforced conformity measures" and the eviction of university lecturers as well as the continuities in terms of structure, staff, and ideas.

The fact that many members of staff and students alike opposed the Weimar Democracy and embraced the "national consensus" of the Nazi regime does not, as both authors stress, reflect any credit on the university. The chapter-section dealing with the Third Reich shows the Nazi Regime's great demand for science and scientists and the amount of mobilisation - or self-mobilisation - of the university for the war since the "crucial year of 1936". The authors differentiate and correct the frequently quoted but clichéd and incorrect image of an essentially "anti-scientific and

anti-academic" Nazi regime and of the basic opposition of academia and politics during the Third Reich.

Chapter three, then, is dedicated to the "Socialist University". After the end of World War II the Friedrich Schiller University was the first university to be reopened in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ). At first, Dr. Tobias Kaiser says, attempts were made to continue the traditions of before 1933. However, the university was redesigned and a new profile was developed. This painful process turned out to be full of conflicts, lasted several years and yielded different results in the various departments.

Arrests and politically motivated expulsions were not uncommon. Dr. Heinz Mestrup points out that "from 1968 on, everyday life at a socialist university becomes the focus of our investigation." The chapter describes the efforts of the GDR Government to keep up with international competition. In the middle of the 1980s, the University of Jena was an island dedicated to research, characterized by a well-funded "Wissenschaftlicher Gerätebau" (scientific apparatus engineering) and the bleak, uniform grey of everyday life in the GDR. Mestrup sums up the situation as follows: "On the one hand, there was excellent research, but on the other, plaster fell off the ceiling".

The authors hope that their new study on the history of their university in the 20th century will find many interested and also critical readers.

Traditionen - Brüche - Wandlungen. Die Universität Jena 1850-1995, Böhlau-Verlag, Köln, Weimar, Wien 2009, X + 1.017 Seiten und 52 Abb., Subskriptionspreis: 39,90 Euro bis 31.05.09, danach 49,90 Euro, ISBN 978-3-412-20248-4

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