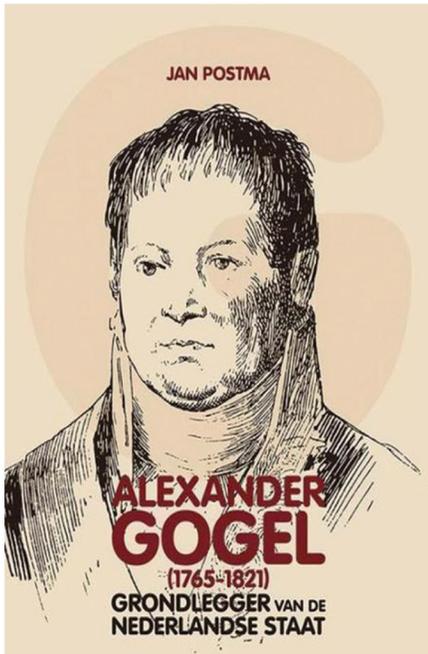


Review

Jan Postma, *Alexander Gogel (1765-1821). Grondlegger van de Nederlandse staat*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2017, 400 pp. ISBN 978-9-087-04633-0.



Alexander Gogel is probably one of the best known and most influential politicians of the Batavian-French period in the Netherlands (1795-1813). In spite of Gogel's fame, however, his biographer Jan Postma starts his introduction by remarking that Gogel has not (yet) received all the attention he deserves from historians. The traditional historiography of the Batavian-French period has reduced Gogel to a non-ideological statesman, who lacked interest in the political underpinnings of his financial reforms. In his dissertation *Alexander Gogel (1765-1821). Grondlegger van de Nederlandse staat* Postma aims to arrive at a more complete picture of Gogel and his political preferences, hereby modifying his technocratic image. Postma embraces Robert Palmer's 1956 description of Gogel as the 'Alexander Hamilton of the new Dutch state', thereby labelling him not only as the founding father of the financial system but

also as one of the most important ideologists of the modern unitary state. Gogel's achievements, Postma argues, should grant him a place in 'the hall of fame alongside other great Dutch statesmen'.

Long neglected, the Batavian period has received the academic attention it deserves in recent decades. Yet the bulk of the historiography on the Batavian and Napoleonic years is directed towards the first years of the Batavian Revolution (1795-1801). The following years of the *Staatsbewind* (State Rule, 1801-1805), Grand Pensionary Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck (1805), King Louis Napoleon (1806-1810) and the Napoleonic Empire (1810-1813) are still relatively understudied. This is especially true for the years in which Gogel would lay the foundation for the financial reforms of the Netherlands between 1805 and 1809 (although several studies have recently appeared on the important financial reforms of the

Napoleonic period). Postma's political biography therefore forms a welcome and important contribution to the historiography on the first years of the nineteenth century.

Postma's book is divided in thirteen chapters, which closely follow the different events and regime changes in the turbulent Batavian-French period. It analyses Gogel's political manoeuvring during the Revolution in 1795, multiple *coups d'état*, the drafting of the first constitution, and the dissolution of the Napoleonic empire and the establishment of the Orangist monarchy after 1813. These pivotal moments of rapid political change serve to structure the book and describe Gogel's political maturation. Postma shows that Gogel's republican convictions were aligned with the revolutionary government when he joined its ranks as 'Agent of Finance' in 1798. He was a strong advocate of the unitary state that was constitutionally established during the new Batavian Republic, which had replaced the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands after the revolution. His ideals led to his dismissal in 1801 under a new, moderate government, which had come to power after a *coup d'état*. While Gogel returned to his merchant business in Amsterdam, his dismissal from government was not the end of his political career. In 1805 he joined the Napoleon-backed Schimmelpenninck government as Secretary of Finance. It was during this period that Gogel implemented his policy programme of a centralised tax system. He continued to work under the French king Louis Napoleon and as a Napoleonic official during the annexation of the Netherlands. At face value his loyalty thus shifted from a republican and 'unitarianist-democrat' to a monarchist under the French King Louis Napoleon and loyalist to the French Emperor.

This brief summary of Gogel's career is somewhat misleading. According to Postma, Gogel's career moves were primarily motivated by his ideological ambitions. His most important political goal was the establishment of a (permanent) unitary state and this goal was to be obtained through the radical reform of the Dutch financial system. Gogel accomplished his mission through a fusion of the provincial debts into a national debt, the introduction of a centralised tax system, interest policy and even a national bank. He was therefore successful in constructing a financial foundation for the unitary state.

Postma's analysis of Gogel's political life is well-documented. It is based on a large collection of biographical archival material, including many letters from the archives of Gogel's closest friends and associates, in particular his colleagues Johan Goldberg and Elias Canneman. These provide insight into many of the uncertainties and rumours, the revolutionary and orangists plots, the Napoleonic intrigues and the unremitting suspense that characterised the period. Postma gives us a good overview of the political culture of these years. During Gogel's life, the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars redrew the map of Europe. In the Netherlands, economic downfall led to national pessimism. After the revolutionary years, poets and writers like Jan Frederik Helmers, Adriaan Loosjes and Willem Bilderdijk would capture the national sentiment of decline. Due to the Napoleonic influence, state independence was threatened and the relevance of democratic politics was mostly lost. Postma shows that Gogel constantly had to balance between 'independence and unity'. While striving for the independence of his country, he also favoured a bond with France in order to impose his unitary ideals. Gogel maintained the idea that the financial modernization of the Batavian Republic was only possible through the establishment of the unitary state. A second dilemma Gogel faced was how to maintain his republican

and democratic ideals while staying in office. Postma shows in detail that Gogel denied political responsibility when his political ideals of unity were challenged and even labels him as 'the most political official in the Batavian-French era'.

This is a surprising remark because Gogel did in fact make some choices against his political nature. It is true that up to 1805 he rejected both a federalist compromise and the politics of reconciliation of the supporters of the House of Orange. However, this changed after 1805. Despite being a firm advocate of the republicanist ideals, Gogel (reluctantly) accepted Schimmelpenninck as the head of state in 1805. One year later, after being personally confronted with Napoleon's power, he also accepted the transition of the Dutch Republic into a Kingdom. Apparently, constitutional pragmatism and financial reform were more important than republican principles. He therefore chose a different path than his former friend and 'ideological beacon' Samuel Wiselius, who would continue to reject every political compromise which devalued republican ideals until 1813. One could even argue that, at face value, Gogel's choices between 1805 and 1813 were not very different from those made by most of his former friends and adversaries. Many old republicans and orangists were keen to accept important positions in the new government after 1806 when the party quarrels from the earlier years lost their significance. Republican discourse lost much of its vigour because of the monarchy, as did the orangist agenda when the old Stadtholder William v passed away in exile in 1806.

After 1805 Gogel cherished his reputation as rational and neutral financial expert who remained untouched by political change. Postma argues that Gogel's non-political attitude was in fact a political statement. He uses archival material to adjust the traditional interpretation of Gogel as a non-political merchant who had an aversion to politics in general. He maintains that Gogel's services in the Schimmelpenninck and Napoleonic governments fit Gogel's ideological beliefs because he could finally restructure the Dutch financial system based on the ideal of the unitary state. Even the integration of the old orangist elite in the government of Louis Napoleon would not lead to a new outburst of anti-orangist rage as was the case in 1801.

Gogel's reforms sparked some criticism. Postma describes Gogel's attitude towards his political opponents in detail, but Gogel was also criticised unanimously in pamphlets as a traitor for giving up the republic and heralding the French monarch and, later as minister, for his tax system and the rising poverty amongst the working poor. The archives contain some of these pamphlets and it would have been insightful if Postma had shedded some more light on the popularity of Gogel amongst the common people. How did public discontent with his reforms influence his political choices?

In 1810 Gogel accepted a new post under Emperor Napoleon with aspirations to serve the country better. The relationship with the king and later the emperor are thoroughly documented by Postma. Gogel's loyalty to Napoleon would determine his marginal role during the uprising in November 1813. Unlike some of his former friends Gogel remained politically attached to the empire. After the defeat of Napoleon, he denied a new position under the orangist king William I, thus ending his political career.

This political biography provides an excellent overview of Gogel's turbulent life, during which The Netherlands shifted from its old federal structure into a modern unitary state. Postma aptly analyses the evolution of political and administrative structures in the years

between 1795-1813 and ideological dilemmas of Alexander Gogel, who was at the centre of this evolution. His book will hopefully serve as inspiration for a new revival of political biographies of the statesmen of the Batavian and Napoleonic period – like Pieter Vreede and Samuel Iperuszoon Wiselius – in the years to come.

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