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## Alexander Gogel (1765-1821): grondlegger van de Nederlandse staat

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# English summary

Alexander Jan Isaac Gogel (1765-1821) was a fascinating person who had a very interesting career in a turbulent time. He held various official functions in the Batavian-French period (1795-1813), always on the basis of his financial expertise. Gogel used his expertise to establish a national financial foundation, a formidable achievement.

With his pioneer work he fused together the seven federated provinces of the old Dutch Republic into a unitary Batavian state with a single tax system, a transparent budget and a common currency. However, his interests and influence were broader than engagement with public finance alone. In Gogel's opinion the political desideratum of equality before the law, linked to the unitary state, also entailed the free entry to a profession. Therefore he was a fierce advocate of the abolition of the guilds. Furthermore, he participated intensively in the debate about the constitutional arrangements of the new state. His cultural interest which was also inspired by the Patriot ideology induced him to establish the National Art Gallery, the forerunner of the present National Museum ('Rijksmuseum').

This political biography intends to provide nuances and so readjust the traditional image of Alexander Gogel. He has been described as an Amsterdam merchant who got mixed up in politics against his will and who maintained his dislike of politics during his lifetime. Moreover, the image over-emphasized his financial expertise. He has been considered a technocrat, only interested in financial-technical matters. Gogel himself propounded this self-image as a way to survive politically through the many revolutions and successive regimes in those turbulent times. However, in reality he was an ideological inspired politician who on a number of essential moments determined very resolutely the course of politics. Gogel was an energetic politician and he struck while the iron was hot. He foresaw a new society without the privileges and disabilities of the political and social system prior to the Batavian revolution. To achieve that, he wanted execute a concrete programme of policy.

In 1781 Alexander Gogel became an apprentice-merchant in an internationally oriented trading firm in Amsterdam. Ten years later he established his own business house. In 1792 Gogel first appeared on the political stage, when he joined the Patriot society *Doctrina*, an important centre for political discussions. As a member of the revolutionary committee in Amsterdam he was engaged with the preparation of the Batavian revolution. In 1794 he made three dangerous trips to

the Southern Netherlands for deliberation with the political representatives in the French army.

After the Batavian revolution (January 1795) Gogel participated in the political discussions about the institutional arrangements of the Batavian Republic. An important subject was the content of the new constitution. Gogel belonged to the group of reformist patriots who wanted radical changes at once. He combined ideas about unitarism with a preference for some direct forms of democracy. As a member of the revolutionary committee he defended the ideas of radical political clubs and popular societies. As a result he confronted the city government which opposed both a national unitary state and powerful popular involvement in government. However, Gogel became very disappointed about the low level of support in the political clubs, popular societies and especially district meetings for his unitary ideal. Gradually his radical democratic ideas faded away. Nevertheless, his preference for the unitary state remained very strong.

After the elections for the first National Assembly in 1796 Gogel shifted his attention to the national political level. He declined membership of the new parliament on account of his business activities, but in two ways he tried to influence the political discussion in the country. Together with Willem Ockerse he established the leading political periodical *De Democraten*. A year later he was one of the founders of a new Society for 'Eenheid en Ondeelbaarheid' (Unity and Indivisibility) with the goal of propagating the unitary state.

In January 1798 a radical coup d'état led to a unitary state. However, Gogel was afraid of the growing influence of 'revolutionary-anarchist' elements. So he did not support the coup in any active way. In the new political system an Executive Directory was introduced, assisted by eight agents with their agencies (departments). They were appointed by and responsible to the Directory. The radical Directory appointed Gogel as Agent of Finance. He had a good reputation as a convinced unitarist with much financial expertise.

In his new function Gogel began to build a financial foundation for the new unitary state. However, his anxiety about the 'revolutionary-anarchist' influence was confirmed. Not only orangists and federalists suffered from the purging of electoral rolls, dismissal of civil servants and removal of city officials, but also unitarists. In particular, Gogel was embittered by a radical coup in March 1798 in Amsterdam. He knew the city councillors who were removed very well. Now Gogel turned against the radical regime in The Hague. He was one of the initiators of a new coup d'état.

After this coup in June 1798, Gogel could continue his activities as Agent. However, the political climate had changed and was unfavorable for political reforms. Gogel had to experience that various policy proposals were opposed and obstructed by Parliament. Late in 1800, after some years in government, Gogel – disappointed about his policy results – wrote a critical memorandum in which he propagated a readjustment of the constitution. Many other constitutional proposals were published. However, Gogel belonged to a minority which wanted to maintain and even consolidate the unitary state.

A long public discussion resulted once more in a coup d'état. A Regency of State with a more federalist constitution was established. Gogel opposed the new regime and its constitution so that his dismissal as Agent of Finance was inevitable. Gogel returned to his merchant business in Amsterdam. He was a rather disappointed man, but he could look back on a fruitful period in office. He had introduced a system of yearly public budgets and accounts. He had fused the provincial debts into a national debt. Eventually his tax plan was adopted by Parliament, but the coup prevented its implementation. However, in the future this plan engendered a much more concrete financial discussion. In the cultural field a National Art Gallery was established.

This rupture in his public career – late in 1801 – led to a period of reflection lasting some years. He followed the politics in The Hague and waited for chances to again put his policy programme into practice. In the three following years, as an Amsterdam merchant he conducted in secret important financial transactions for the new regime. He also gave advice about the establishment of a national bank. These contacts gave him a good view on political developments, and he maintained a respectable reputation in the Hague.

In 1804-1805 Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck approached him with a view to his accepting the office of Secretary of State of Finance. After long and intensive negotiations Gogel persuaded the hesitating Grand Pensionary to agree to a centralised tax system, the most important point in his policy programme. After all the preparations in preceding years Gogel could set up most of that system in the single year of Schimmelpenninck's government.

In the spring of 1806 Napoleon decided to turn the Batavian Republic into a monarchy with his brother Louis as King. Gogel was a member of the Dutch delegation which stayed during some months in Paris to negotiate about conversion. For him personally the result was that his ministry was continued. The republican Gogel accepted the new monarchy in order to consolidate his financial reforms. His relation with the new King Louis, an inconsistent and neurotic monarch, was very difficult. The King saw the minister as a servant; Gogel saw himself as a statesman with own ideas. This resulted in many conflicts, until in 1809 Gogel forced the King to dismiss him as a minister. During the period of the annexation of the Netherlands by France Gogel once more managed the Dutch public finance as a Napoleonic official, the Intendant-General of Finance (1810-1813).

After the departure of the French in 1813 Gogel refused – unlike many other officials and civil servants – to accept a function in the new Orange-regime. This finished his public career. But in 1820 he was prepared to give advice to the King about a reform of the tax system. These advice resulted in a restoration of his own tax system of 1805-1806 which thereafter was maintained for nearly eighty years. Before, in 1814, the monarch implemented Gogel's plan for a national bank, which resulted in the establishment of 'De Nederlandsche Bank'.

In this political biography there are two central themes. One concerns the dilemmas Gogel faced in his striving after the ideal of state unity. The first dilemma related to the balance between independence and unity. Gogel strove after independ-

ence for his country, but he was also in favor of a strong bond with France which he thought necessary to execute the reforms leading to a unitary state. The second dilemma contrasted unity with democratic participation. For Gogel the democratic ideal fell into the background, especially because Parliament opposed his ideal of unity. A third dilemma was that he was set against a presidency or a monarchy. However, he accepted these forms of government as necessary in order to realize the state unity.

A second theme in this biography is that Gogel constantly fashioned his image as a non-politician. He presented himself as a technocrat, averse to politics. This presentation had the advantage that he could stay on speaking terms with people of diverse political views. This image was in harmony with the political culture in the Batavian Republic. To aspire openly to a public office was taboo. At the same time a citizen had to fulfill his duty.

In reality Gogel had strong political convictions. He fought for his policies and he resigned office if the political circumstances made it impossible to attain his political goals. Thus he was the most political official in the Batavian-French era. Throughout this period he put his stamp upon political and social-economic developments. He manifested himself as a spirited activist, an editor of an eminent political periodical, an involved adviser and a persistent official. He was successful in building a financial foundation for the unitary state. Gogel was the most influential politician in this crucial period in the Dutch history. With his resolute pursuit of ideals resulting in a new state he belongs to the hall of fame alongside other great Dutch statesmen.