

# Karel Paul van der Mandele (1880 – 1975)

*Martial Libera*

During the postwar period, Karel Paul van der Mandele played an important role in river improvements for the Rhine and its tributaries through the Rhine Union of Chambers of Commerce, a transnational interest group he headed from its creation in 1949 until 1965. The experience of the war and the German occupation prompted this banker to promote postwar European construction through strengthened economic cooperation between Western Europeans, which he believed would occur via the creation of a genuine network of rivers serving as the backbone for the Rhine corridor, and driving Western European trade.

Mandele was born in Delft on November 1, 1880, into a family of financiers. His father Willem Karel Samuel van der Mandele was a cashier and securities broker in this city, where his liberal-minded family was well-respected. Karel Paul van der Mandele earned his secondary school diploma from Delft high school, and then began studies in economics at the University of Lausanne with Vilfredo Pareto, which he quickly interrupted to study law at Leiden University, where he established a lasting friendship with his professor of international law, Cornelis van Vollenhoven. The difficulties that the family business experienced in 1901, and his father's subsequent disrepute, were a painful experience for the young Mandele. He devoted himself to paying back his family's creditors in full.

After completing his studies in 1902, Mandele first worked as a lawyer in a law office in the Hague. In 1906 he married Hermine Sophie Marie van Bosse. The couple had four children (three daughters and a son). Mandele settled in Rotterdam in the same year, and was hired as the secretary for the board of directors of Rotterdamsche Bank Vereeniging (Rob-aver), one of the most powerful investment banks in Rotterdam. Four years later he became its director, and held this position until 1940. Beginning in 1932, Mandele also became a member of the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and was easily elected to be its president in 1938 thanks to his commitment to transforming the city, serving in this capacity until 1960. During the interwar period he invested in embellishing the city, conserving nature in the province, and developing the sciences in Rotterdam. He did so by helping secure financing for a number of

striking monuments, including the Boijmans Museum, a stadium, the stock exchange, and the port hospital, which were completed in the 1930s.

During the Second World War, Mandele was in a complicated position, as it was difficult to represent the interests of Rotterdam and its population, and simultaneously satisfy those of its occupiers. Mandele was nevertheless able to conserve the duties of the chamber of commerce. Thanks to the chamber's many branches in the province, he was even able to assist the general population and companies, and especially to preserve the chamber as a site for the Dutch to meet and exchange, at a time when the collaboration of town councilors with the occupier was on the rise. In 1943 Mandele joined a resistance group—the Patriotic Committee—created upon the request of the British government, and in this context helped finance the railway strike of 1944-1945. During the occupation, he began to think about the postwar period and the plans needed for the recovery. He believed in a world founded on new values. He benefited from the analyses of his compatriot Lilli Hedwig van der Schalk-Schuster, who was close to German business circles hostile to the war, and informed him of their international plans for the postwar period, as well as the secret contacts they had abroad.

Mandele was at the height of his career during the postwar period. In Rotterdam he served as president of the chamber of commerce, working with the city's administration to rebuild the city as a hub for global maritime traffic, thereby consecrating the principle of joint action by government services and private initiatives. The monthly meetings between city administrators and representatives from the business class also led to the organization, every five years, of festivities to publicize the city, such as Rotterdam Ahoy in 1950, E55 in 1955, and the Floriade in 1960. In order to complete these projects, Mandele helped create a number of foundations tasked with fundraising.

He was also active on the international scene. In Western Europe, Mandele was hostile to the construction of a political order. He believed more in functional reforms, and called for uniting European economic interests within international corporations, in which Dutch companies could play a leading role. He rubbed shoulders with the directors of Unilever, including Paul Rijkens and David Mitrany, who served as the company's international affairs officer, and was more known for his academic duties and as a theorist of international functionalism. They were both interested in Mandele's ideas, and encouraged him. Mandele implemented his projects by creating and promoting the Rhine Union of Chambers of Commerce (RUCC) in 1949, which in its beginnings included approximately forty

chambers of commerce from the seven Rhine countries: Austria (connected to the Rhine basin by the Inn River and Lake Constance), Belgium (connected to the Rhine by the Meuse River), France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the Federal Republic of Germany. By creating this union that he presided over until 1965, Mandele achieved another of his objectives, namely reintegrating Western Germany within the European scene by granting its representatives the same rights as those from other countries. With the RUCC, he unsuccessfully sought to create a “greater Europe” that would move beyond the borders of the Cold War through navigable links between the Rhine and Danube rivers. Mandele also failed in his attempt to create an international corporation uniting the economic interests of the Rhine. His vision of instituting the Rhine Development Corporation within the RUCC remained in the planning stages due to a lack of support from many chambers of commerce. Mandele nevertheless remained attached to the functionalist method, which explains his reluctance toward the first European initiatives, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), the Council of Europe, and even the European Coal and Steel Community. He did not think it was possible to build Europe from the top-down, or to create an institutional Europe whose initiative came primarily from the states; this would entail new forms of state intervention, international in this instance, that the experience of the preceding quarter century would definitely disqualify. For Mandele, Europe had to build itself from the bottom-up, a Europe of active forces driven by functional, flexible, and responsive economic actors that could quickly produce results. In 1957, he once again opposed the creation of the European Economic Community, which he doubted would be favorable to Dutch interests. However, Mandele was able to strengthen the role of river transport in Western Europe. The RUCC took an active part in works to make numerous Rhine tributaries navigable, including the Main river, the Meuse river, the Moselle river (canalized in 1964), and Neckar river.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Mandele promoted the international development of the port of Rotterdam. He helped create a number of specialized institutes to analyze international developments in relation to commercial activity. Under the auspices of the Overseas Institute, he pushed for institutes for Africa, Canada, the USSR, Scandinavia, Australia, and Latin America. He also laid the foundation for the future expansion of the Nederlandsche Economic High School (NEH), one of the schools that subsequently led to the creation of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

His late career was marked by honors. In 1955 he received the Silver Carnation, awarded each year to individuals who contributed to Dutch culture. He was also made a chamberlain in the special service of Queen Juliana, and in 1958 a doctor *honoris causa* of the Dutch School of Economics (today Erasmus University Rotterdam). While Mandele stopped serving as president of the Rotterdam Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 1960, he continued to be active on numerous boards of directors during the 1960s. He died on January 23, 1975 in Rotterdam.

## References

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