

Summary

In this book, research was conducted into the downfall of Gijs van Hall as mayor of Amsterdam in the spring of 1967, when he was removed from office by the newly formed government under the leadership of the Catholic prime minister Piet de Jong. The fact that a mayor of Amsterdam was forced to step down by the cabinet was a unique political and historical event, which also raised many questions afterwards about both the person Gijs van Hall and his life history, as well as the context in which he should have operated as mayor of the capital between 1957 and 1967.

His downfall raised questions like: why did this man – who had worked his whole life in the banking sector – become mayor? What went wrong precisely during his term as mayor? Was that down to Van Hall himself or was he also a victim of circumstances, victim of a new era and the increasingly influential visual culture? Van Hall believed that his removal had something to do with being a descendant of the distinguished 19th century family of public administrators Van Hall. He believed that he had become a symbol of the objectionable regent class and its paternalistic regent mentality, and the victim of opposition to this from a new generation. In his eyes, all the criticism he received was ‘only because I am a Van Hall’. Van Hall believed, in other words, that he was a victim of his own family history. But was that the case? Did his own history really play a role in his fall from grace as mayor? On the basis of five historical themes, I have attempted to answer those questions and place Gijs van Hall’s downfall in a historical perspective. The themes *status and standing* of the Amsterdam upper class, *resistance and heroism* during and after the war, *networks* and the interconnectedness of elites, *private and public* in the public administration, and *turnaround and continuity in the office of mayor* could shed light on Van Hall’s forced removal from office.

As the fifth child in a family of ten children, Gijs van Hall (1904-1977) spent his youth in the beautiful house of his parents, Aat and Nel van Hall-Boissevain, on one of the main Amsterdam canals and later in a dune villa near Aerdenhout. His youth was characterised by illness and a sojourn in a sanatorium, but also by travel, pleasure, wealth,

prosperity and love: he already met publisher's daughter Emma Nijhoff (1905-1990), with whom he would spend the rest of his life, during his secondary school years at the *Amsterdams Lyceum*.

In the 1920s, Gijs studied Law in Leiden, where he learnt to 'speak his mind' in the student society. During that time, he went on several business trips to the United States by steam boat with his father, who was a banker and stock trader, where he was deeply impressed by the American way of life and where it seemed that anyone could fulfil his or her individual dream in complete freedom. After getting married to Emma, he left with her to New York in 1928, where he worked a number of years at an investment firm on Wall Street and witnessed the stock market crash of October 1929 live.

At the heart of the economic crisis of the 1930s, he returned to the Netherlands, with his wife and daughter, where he was made director of the *Amsterdamsch Trustee's Kantoor* (Amsterdam Trustee's Office). They settled as commuters in Laren, an agricultural village in North Holland. It became evident there how much the American concept of progress had changed them: the oppressive and pillarised Dutch society no longer appealed to them. They regularly had conversations with contemporaries about a new way of organising the political system and breaking down the pillarisation that dominated Dutch society. But then the war came.

Together with his brother Walraven, Gijs van Hall played an important role in the financing of the Dutch resistance by forging treasury bills in secret cooperation with officials from *De Nederlandsche Bank*, which was under the supervision of the National Socialist Movement of the Netherlands (NSB) member Meinoud Rost van Tonningen. The plan was devised by Gijs and based on a case that he and Emma had witnessed at close quarters in New York in the 1930s. A major financial scandal had taken place there, caused by embezzlement at the construction company Kreuger & Toll, which had defrauded banks by giving forged treasury bills as security. Gijs and his brother devised something similar for the financing of the resistance and thus became the architects of the biggest bank robbery in Dutch history: a 'robbery' of 100 million Dutch guilders, which paid for a large portion of the

resistance activities against the Germans. His brother paid for these resistance activities with his life.

Gijs was considered a war hero after the war. Or rather: a double war hero, on account of his murdered brother and best friend Walraven. Gijs was asked to sit on the boards of many organisations that were occupied with the ending and handling of the war. In the meantime, he had become a banker at the Labouchere bank and a member of the recently established Dutch Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA). That membership was a notable choice for a man from a liberal family. The 'left-wing' membership of the PvdA was initially tolerated by the 'right-wing' bank, but when he became a member of the Senate as a 'red banker' in 1956, the bank urgently requested that he stand down as director. Gijs van Hall refused to do so, but also knew that he could forget a further banking career as a prominent member of the PvdA. In this light, the office of mayor was just what the doctor ordered.

According to many people, it was logical that a man with such an illustrious war record was rewarded with the mayorship of the capital. 'You earned this mayorship during the war,' wrote a prominent fellow party member. Moreover, Gijs van Hall was a man from a family of public administrators with an extremely good reputation. The mayorship was bound to be a success, remarked most newspapers in January 1957. However, it turned out to be a mayorship with a tragic ending.

In his first years as mayor, Gijs van Hall was responsible for a number of important achievements, such as the privatisation of the university, the (continuation of the) construction of the IJ tunnel and the building of the Bijlmermeer district. However, the picture that ultimately remained was of a man who lost control over his city in the final years of his mayorship, who was unable to come to grips with a new era, who had no answer to the calls for more democracy, who called on psychologists to help him and his city, and who came across as desperate in the media, especially television. However, contrary to what was known up until now, it was not only the new era that cost him the office of mayor. It was not only his own 19th century family history, as he believed himself. This research reveals that Gijs van Hall

had insufficient insight into what the office of mayor actually entailed and consequently ‘contributed’, as it were, to his own downfall.

Recent research into the office of mayor has revealed that mayors attribute a number of (timeless) roles to themselves. On the basis of those roles, research was conducted into how Van Hall performed as mayor. The conclusion can be drawn that Van Hall ended up in the wrong profession. He had an inadequate vision of what the office of mayor meant and considered himself to be an apolitical city manager. The office of mayor was never and is still not a (party) political position, but a mayor must definitely have a political antenna in order to be able to represent the interests of his city as well as possible within political bodies, such as the parliament or the municipal council. Good insight into balances of power and a feeling for politics is also important, but Van Hall was not very interested in politics, did not have a political antenna and regularly infuriated politicians and civil servants by making public statements about what he saw as their poor performance. However, Van Hall’s qualities as a lobbyist and networker were put to very good use within informal decision-making circles, but these qualities were considerably less successful in formal politics.

Van Hall tried to run his city like a company, of which he was the director. Van Hall therefore felt extremely comfortable as chairman of the Municipal Executive. He was able to take on the role of ‘chairman of the board’ in that capacity and aldermen were also generally very satisfied with Van Hall’s performance within the confines of the Municipal Executive. However, the fact that a city – with all its conflicts of interests – is something completely different to a profit-oriented company appeared to elude Van Hall. Moreover, Gijs van Hall was not very pleased with the type of official organisation that a municipality actually is. He tried to break down the official culture in the town hall: it all needed to be quicker and more efficient, preferably like in a commercial organisation. However, it was impossible to instil a sense of urgency within the public administration, much to his annoyance.

Van Hall inherited a chief constable of police with a rather militaristic view of police work from his predecessor Arnold d'Ailly. Gijs van Hall had no sympathy for that view, but left the chief constable to his own devices, as long as he had nothing to do with it. Van Hall was not very interested in police matters and largely left the maintenance of public order, a key task of the mayor, to the chief constable, as a result of which a situation ultimately arose in which nobody had control over public order anymore. In addition, the police was undermanned, as a result of which it was not always able to perform its tasks properly. Van Hall asked the Dutch cabinet, nevertheless, for extra officers, but was given no for an answer.

The traditional mayoral role of being 'father of the citizens' (*burgervader*, m/f), that is to say offering support and refuge to all and being there at times of joy and sadness, was certainly taken up by Van Hall, even if those times were often formal in nature. The fact that he was often not seen as a mayor to everyone was precisely down to that formal style. He considered himself to be an *Amsterdammer* (an authentic citizen of Amsterdam) among *Amsterdammers*, but he didn't appear to realise what that entailed precisely. The 'strict fatherly' aspect of the office of mayor was discredited as being patriarchal and paternalistic from the mid-1960s and thus Van Hall's conduct and style as well, which was focused on correcting and lecturing those who he deemed to be out of line. The youth uprising was precisely related to that attitude.

Van Hall's role as standard bearer and public relations officer of the municipality was a role that suited him down to the ground. The marketing of the city was of paramount importance and he didn't mind, or actually insisted, that everyone knew that, from Amsterdam to faraway countries. Van Hall regularly travelled abroad – often with his wife – in order to promote the city and trade interests. That made it even more frustrating for him that the images of unrest and violence were broadcast around the world, thus damaging the image of 'his' Amsterdam.

Van Hall's lack of vision about what the office of mayor entailed precisely was a flaw that was not yet noticeable during his first term of office, because no extreme problems and disturbances of public order

had taken place. However, the pressure cooker in which the city found itself during his second term of office had a disruptive effect, with all kinds of problems coming together and interweaving: the police file, the rapid rise of television which registered everything, the call for more democracy from young people and the sometimes emotional – or actually emotionless – way in which Van Hall reacted to the problems. Under the pressure of those circumstances, the new government made a clean break and could thus portray itself as being decisive. State and street, united in a devil's pact. It led to the tragic end of Gijs van Hall's term as mayor. This was even more tragic, given that so much was expected of him, as a war hero, when he took office.