Why They are Tall and We are Small! Competition between Antwerp and Rotterdam in the Twentieth Century

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This chapter considers the results of micro-economic and political-institutional research that has been carried out into the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam and investigates whether it can help to understand why the two ports have made quite different choices as regards labour organization on the docks. Despite the fact that ports like Antwerp, Hamburg, Bremen, Le Havre and Rotterdam all share the same hinterland and therefore compete with each other for market share, competition between specifically Antwerp and Rotterdam has become an important focus of attention in previous research projects.

*Citius, altius, fortius: from sail to steam*

From the mid-nineteenth century the steamship gradually came into service. The steam engine and the iron ships were stronger, more powerful and more flexible. More power led to higher speed and greater capacity. The considerably higher running-cost of those steamships forced shipping companies, port authorities and cargo handlers to adapt and change the organization both on board the ships and also on shore. Because of the higher running costs of the steam vessels, the ‘dead’ time in the port had to be reduced to more realistic, economic terms, so the loading and unloading of cargo needed to be speeded up. Because of the volumes and the need for a faster turnaround, cargo handling became a more specialized business.

In Antwerp cargo handling and especially the transport and storage of the goods had traditionally been dominated by the *naties*. The crew of the ship took care of the actual loading or unloading of the ship and delivered or received the goods to and from the *naties* who brought the
goods under the crane or transported the goods from under the crane to a warehouse or shed. Naties had been active in the port since the thirteenth century. Originally they were no more than a group of labourers working together in a co-operative structure, and initially this meant little more than working together and afterwards sharing profits. Gradually, the expansion of the port led to a more formal structure of naties with their own rules and procedures. As a consequence of this formalization, from the fifteenth century onwards people who wanted to enter this business had to buy a share of the natie and thus became formal shareholders of their company. As from then various companies of naties emerged and the members of the naties gradually started buying the necessary equipment as a group. As the port and hence the cargo handling business grew further, this core group of natie companies with ‘natie-men’ became too rigid to cope with all the work, so from the seventeenth century the naties started hiring casual labourers. Unlike the natie-men, these casual workers were not formal shareholders of the company but were hired on a daily basis and were paid a formal wage for the service they rendered that day. They could work for various natie companies.3

In Rotterdam the vemen offered more or less the same services as the naties did in Antwerp.4 The vemen were active in transport, distribution and warehousing. As in Antwerp – and in other ports – they worked together with the crew to load and unload ships.

With the introduction of the steam vessel, the need for a faster turn-round of the vessel, combined with the larger volumes, transformed cargo handling in most (European) ports into a more specialized business. The ship’s crew were no longer able to load or unload their vessel themselves. In both Antwerp and in Rotterdam specialized stevedoring companies developed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in Antwerp at least often founded and owned by former captains.5 These stevedores made exclusive use of casual labour. An ‘army’ of casual labourers was formed in both ports. In 1899 the Arbeidsblad – the official bulletin of the Belgian Ministry of Labour – estimated the number of dockers in Antwerp at around 25,000.6 In Rotterdam an equal figure is mentioned.7

In Rotterdam, the difference between the traditional vemen and the new stevedoring companies was to fade very soon. Veem and stevedoring activities were combined in vertical integrated companies. In Antwerp, however, a clear distinction between the traditional naties and the stevedoring companies remained. Both types of companies stayed within their own territory: the naties remained active in transport, distribution and warehousing, whereas the actual loading and unloading of the vessels was the sole terrain of the stevedores.8