

Presentation Corfu September 3rd 2023

Fridtjof Nansen – His life and work

First, please let me express my gratitude for the invitation by the Albert Cohen Association to come to Corfu and for the opportunity to give a speech marking the anniversary of the Corfu incident. I am very pleased and also proud to honour Fridtjof Nansen who gave refugees an identity with the Nansen passport – securing their right to travel and find shelter. Albert Cohen continued this important work both in The League of Nations and in The United Nations. Please let me elaborate more on Fridtjof Nansen – his life and work.

Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was born in Oslo with a silverspoon in his mouth and famous ancestors in his family tree. His mother Adelaide Johanne Thekla Sidore was the daughter of a Baron and the niece of a Count. Born into the exclusive Norwegian aristocracy, Fridtjof Nansen benefited from a privileged social background by Norwegian standards. His upbringing, however, was strict and with considerable elements of humility according to the ideals of his father, the lawyer Baldur Fridtjof Nansen. His father's ancestors lacked aristocratic titles, but had solid roots in the Norwegian and Danish bourgeoisie. Fridtjof Nansen was descended directly from the mayor of Copenhagen who played a prominent role in the anti-aristocratic revolution in Denmark in 1660.

Growing up, Nansen developed a close relationship with nature and different outdoor activities. Going on to study zoology at university, including fieldwork studies of arctic animals during a season aboard the sealing boat Viking, he finished his doctoral thesis in neurobiology in 1887. His first postdoctoral project was not, however, in neurobiology, but a three month expedition cross-country skiing from the east coast to the west coast of Greenland in 1888. Even though scientific results were limited, Nansen won heroic fame and fortune, and in addition the heart of Eva Sars, the daughter of an acknowledged Norwegian zoologist. Eva was a talented soprano, and introduced Nansen to a network of famous artists and influential intellectuals in Oslo.

Nansen's arctic experiences gave rise to the idea for another expedition. Having observed driftwood near the coast of Greenland, he launched a hypothesis on oceanic currents around the North Pole. To confirm his hypothesis he planned to have a specially constructed ship, Fram (Forward) frozen into pack ice and to let it drift across the pole. In combination with the scientific objectives, he also wanted to make a bid for the North Pole. Great scepticism on the part of the Royal Geographic Society in London did not stop Nansen from realizing his plan – he simply concluded that “since he had not heard any objections of importance the discussion could be closed”.

Fram left Oslo in June 1893. Two years later Nansen, with his companion Hjalmar Johansen, left the ship for another arctic cross-country skiing trip, reaching as far as 86°14'. They overwintered in Franz Josef's Land hunting for food and sharing a sleeping bag to keep warm. Accidentally running into a British expedition, they were able to arrive in the North of Norway in July 1896. A week later, Fram arrived too and Nansen and Johansen joined the ship, starting a triumphant expedition along the Norwegian coast, and ending in Oslo. Arriving at an all-time low moment in Norwegian national pride due to the politically inferior role in the union with Sweden, Nansen was received as a national hero and a modern Viking king.

The University of Oslo awarded him a professorship in zoology, and he also engaged in oceanographic and geological research. His experiences as a polar explorer supported his role as a researcher and vice versa. All through his life he regarded his scientific work as his main role, but this work was to be interrupted by frequent appearances in other guises over the next decades: the politician, the diplomat and the humanitarian aid worker. In addition, Fridtjof Nansen was a very talented painter, and wrote novels along with academic publications. He also had a reputation as an excellent dancing partner and even designed his own collection of clothes. Nansen was without question a universal genius, and well aware of it too.

Nansen played an essential part as a politician and diplomat in the political developments which led to the dissolution of the Union of Norway and Sweden in 1905. He wrote articles in leading national newspapers demanding political action. He used his name and reputation in Britain to lobby for support for Norwegian independence. The Swedish representative in London, Captain Wallenberg, whose task it was to influence the British press in favour of a continued union, is said to have complained that "the name of Nansen in London was more powerful than all of Sweden". Finally, Nansen was strongly involved in having the Danish Prince Carl elected as first king of independent Norway, King Haakon. King Haakon and Queen Maud, the daughter of King Edward VII, became close friends of Nansen. King Haakon appointed him the first Norwegian ambassador to London, and Nansen was responsible for negotiating a security treaty for Norway.

Losing his wife to pneumonia in December 1907, and left with five small children, Nansen resigned as ambassador. He returned to his scientific work at the University of Oslo, especially oceanographic research. In 1913 his youngest son, who was born with cerebral palsy, died of meningitis. The loss of his wife and son had a deep effect on Nansen both emotionally and intellectually, and this was probably the main reason he withdrew from the public and political scene until World War I.

The outbreak of WWI and its horrors made Nansen change his focus and he made a comeback as a vigorous diplomat on the public stage. He led the Norwegian trade negotiations in Washington during the war and, in typically arbitrary spirit, signed the agreement without awaiting formal authorization from the Norwegian government. This offended the Norwegian foreign minister who denied Nansen a part in the official Norwegian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where discussions on establishing the League of Nations were a central topic. Nansen had a strong personality, a profound sense of duty as well as strong confidence in his own assessments and decisions, as illustrated in his comment in London before the Fram expedition. He wrote to his wife "it remains unclear who the Government will send, it will definitely not be me, and it is unlikely they have someone else that will do." Nansen participated in the conference anyway, in the capacity of leader of the Norwegian society of The League of Nations.

For the rest of his life he was to be chairman of the Norwegian delegation to Geneva. Nansen believed with passion that the world needed a new international system based not on force but law. He detested the inner working of power politics and the secret old diplomacy of the past. Also, a fierce opponent of international aggression, Nansen assumed a leadership role in the preparations for the League's first disarmament conference and on issues of collective security. In the League of Nations Nansen found yet another role - as a humanitarian aid worker.

Nansen was assigned four mandates as high commissioner in the League of Nations. His first was repatriating prisoners of war, working closely with the Red Cross. In 1921 he became responsible for Russian refugees who had fled the revolution and the civil war. The dramatic end of the Greek-Turkish war in 1922, causing nearly a million people to flee from Asia Minor to Greece, gave Nansen another mandate as high commissioner for Greek refugees. Working on the Asia Minor situation, he was also introduced to Armenian refugees, and this became his last mandate. The Armenian question became a concern for him for the rest of his life, both as a high commissioner and personally. In addition to his League of Nation mandates, he also engaged in relief work concerning the famine in Russia. In 1922, Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work for victims of the Russian famine and with Greek refugees.

The most important result from Nansen's high commissioner period was the Nansen Passport. It started out as an idea in the League to issue identity certificates to secure refugees a minimum of rights. The situation was especially difficult for Russian and Armenian refugees who had been deprived of their citizenship. The identity and travel documents were referred to as the Nansen Passport. From 1926 this became the official name and the passports included a portrait of Nansen on the front page. Governments could issue them without granting citizenship and this meant refugees could travel across borders. The Nansen Passport laid the foundation for all modern international refugee legislation. The UN's High Commissioners for Refugees proudly trace their traditions back to Fridtjof Nansen

Nansen filled his roles in the League with his typical personality traits – arbitrariness and action-orientated impatience – and earned a reputation as the *enfant terrible* of the League. His strong personality, in addition to his fame from his expeditions in the Arctic, undoubtedly gave Nansen a unique position in the League of Nations and to a certain extent he also exploited the nimbus surrounding him. He had quite an authority by simply being Fridtjof Nansen. Especially when it came to principles and questions he personally considered important, the personality Fridtjof Nansen clearly emerges. On several occasions he acted outside of the Norwegian delegation's views, or without Norwegian government backing and beyond his high commission mandate.

The Corfu Incident in 1923 is one example. Nansen reacted against Mussolini's aggression in Corfu, and stressed that Italy, as a co-founder and a member of the League of Nations, had a duty to submit a conflict to the League before resorting to measures of forcible coercion. He initiated and led an unofficial and private meeting held by representatives of the small powers. These states wanted to take the Corfu question directly to the Assembly. Although not backed by their governments, Nansen, and his Swedish and Danish colleagues, even threatened to withdraw from Geneva if the League failed to intervene in the crisis. By taking strong action and by insisting that the League was competent to deal with this clear act of aggression, the representatives of the small powers at Geneva, led by Nansen, had saved the League from a complete disaster in its first encounter with international aggression.

At the end the Conference of Ambassadors, held in Paris, the decision was made not to refer the incident to the Council of the League. Fearful of Italian repercussions if the case should be taken up

by the League, they awarded indemnity to Italy on the questionable grounds that there had been negligence on the part of the Greek authorities.

Nansen addressed the issue of the principles of the League, using the Corfu crisis as an illustration. He gave a speech in the Assembly on 28 September criticizing:

“... the transfer of the whole settlement of this question from the League of Nations, as an organized permanent and impartial association of which all interested states are members, and which works in full light of publicity, to a temporary allied organization which comprises only a few states and works by the old method. This is a matter that I cannot but regret. That transfer was undoubtedly legally correct, but in my judgement utterly undesirable. The time has come, it would seem to me, when the Great Powers should use the machinery which they have created at Geneva, and to which the small Powers have been invited, with so many promises, to give their adherence.”

He also criticized the harsh indemnity of 50,000,000 lira and characterized it as “utterly unjustified by any documents which have so far been published”, and further argued that “[i]t has been the understanding of world public opinion that the actual amount of indemnity should be settled by the Permanent Court of International Justice unless Greece failed in certain duties. No proof has been given to the world that Greece did so fail.”

Nansen stressed that he could not reconcile his own conscience if he did not express his views publicly. He was then interrupted by the President and asked to confine himself to the declaration of the Council. On his way down from the podium, Nansen commented aloud – slightly irritated – “I might say more, but my conscience would not allow me not to say these few words”, and received a round of applause from the Assembly.

Nansen’s actions created some friction between Italy and Norway, and the Norwegian chargé d’affaires in Rome had some undesirable attention from Mussolini. One of the Italian delegates to the League characterized Nansen as *un bel tipo*, a fine type, who obviously felt more obligation to the League than the interests of his own country. An anecdote tells the story of how Nansen insisted on launching a personal economic boycott of Italian food and wine during a restaurant visit in Geneva making sure he was served Swiss chicken and French red wine.

Another example of Nansen’s orientation to action is his work as high commissioner for Greek refugees from Asia Minor in the autumn of 1922. Nansen contributed personally to getting the League involved in the dramatic refugee situation in Smyrna in the final phase of the Greek-Turkish war. More than a million refugees fled, many in panic, to Athens, Thessaloniki and the Greek islands. Nansen played an active part in getting a speedy assignment of a high commissioner mandate for Greek refugees. He immediately began organizing emergency relief and left for Constantinople. In addition, he put his efforts into working for a release of Greek prisoners of war, as the Ankara Government had issued a decision to define all male Greeks in Asia Minor age 15-45 as prisoners of war and deport them to Anatolia.

The mandate for Greek refugees was humanitarian. However, by mid-October, and by invitation from the four allied high commanders in Constantinople (UK, France, Italy, Japan), Nansen initiated soundings to reach an agreement for an exchange of populations. Venizelos, at the time diplomatic representative for the Greek government in London, also requested Nansen to start a process

towards such an exchange. Thus Nansen – never one to interpret his mandates so that they would limit his independent initiatives – entered into a political role, and negotiated on behalf of the Greek government. His motivation was a deep felt compassion for the Greek refugees, a desire to contribute to a lasting and appropriate solution to the refugee situation, and to secure peace in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Due to delays from the Turkish authorities there was no breakthrough in the negotiations. Mustafa Kemal probably thought they would achieve a better result in the formal Great Power's conference in Lausanne later. Furthermore they regarded Nansen as a private person, as pro-Greek – and his fame as a polar explorer did not impress the Turks. Turkey was not a formal state at the time and not a member in the League. In his private correspondence Nansen leaves no doubt of his opinion of "these Turks". He expressed irritation because "[t]he Turks think they need not take any notice of what Europe's opinion of them are", and impatiently stated "I am not made for waiting indefinitely, not knowing when there will be a solution".

Though Nansen's negotiations in the autumn of 1922 did not result in a formal agreement, his draft for an exchange of populations laid the foundation for the negotiations at the Lausanne Conference on 30 January 1923, which led to a separate convention of the Lausanne Treaty regarding a compulsory exchange of populations. Nansen attended a committee at the Lausanne Conference to present his views on the exchange of populations and how it should be carried out. In his view, a repatriation of the Greek refugees was not realistic since Turkish authorities had made them stateless and denied them any possibility to return to Asia Minor – it was simply *fait accompli*. The advantage of a formal agreement would be to give the Greek refugees a possibility to receive some compensation for the property and possessions they had been forced to leave behind.

In the end approximately 1.2 million Greek Orthodox were exchanged for approximately 400,000 Muslims. It was the first formal, compulsory exchange of populations in Europe, and it was based on religion. It is worth mentioning that not all of the Greek Muslims were Turks; some had Albanian origins, but they were still included in the exchange. There were only two exceptions: Greek inhabitant of Constantinople and Muslim inhabitants of Western Thrace.

Fridtjof Nansen's different roles up until WWI can be viewed in a national context and were to a large extent motivated by securing Norwegian independence and national pride. His focus gradually shifted during and after the war and became more and more international as he engaged with the League of Nations and additional humanitarian projects. In parallel with the shift from a national focus to an international focus, a change can be found in Nansen's personal ideals – a development from egocentrism to altruism. Though his polar expeditions had scientific as well as patriotic motivations, there was a substantial element of egocentrism, and at a time when heroic achievements had high value there were plenty of opportunities for Nansen to nurse his ego and celebrity status. His worldviews changed, partly because of the loss of his wife and son, and partly because of WWI. Although he regarded himself primarily as a scientist and would have preferred to return to his scientific work after the war, due to a strong sense of moral duty and responsibility he felt obliged to continue his humanitarian aid work. Nansen was never compensated economically for his work in the League of Nations, he chose to travel in economy class and stayed in inexpensive hotels. It is tempting to conclude that his horizons were expanded geographically, politically and mentally.

Fridtjof Nansen died on 13 May 1930, and he was given a state funeral on 17 May– the day Norway celebrates the signing of its first constitution. Norwegian National Day that year became the frame around the national hero's funeral. The day is celebrated with a children's parade in the capital, and in 1930 the parade honoured Nansen with lowered flags when passing his coffin at the University Square. So, the myth of Fridtjof Nansen was consolidated and associated with Norway and Norwegian nationalism. His reputation was not inferior to that of his famous ancestors: Nansen succeeded in becoming a myth and a legend in his own country while he was still alive.