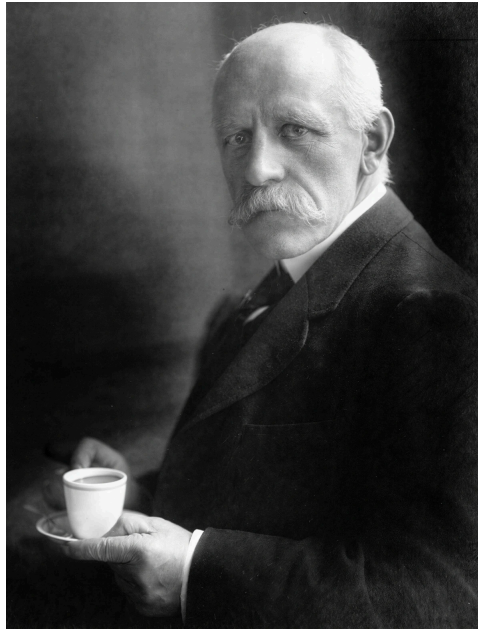




Source: Nansen, n.d., United Nations Archives at Geneva, P0261a

NANSEN, Fridtjof

Norwegian scientist and High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations 1921-1930

By **Francesca Piana** · Version 17 March 2014

Was born 10 October 1861 in Store Frøen, Norway, and passed away 13 May 1930 in Lysaker, Norway. He was the son of Baldur Nansen, lawyer, and Baroness Adelaide Wedel Jarlsberg. On 6 September 1889 he married Eva Helene Sars, classical singer. They had two daughters and three sons. After Sars' death on 9 December 1907 he married Sigrun Sandberg, who had divorced from Gerhard Munthe, on 17 January 1919.

On film: www.flyktninghjelpen.no/?did=9106266

Biography

Nansen was raised in a simple and frugal environment in Store Frøen, north of the Norwegian capital Christiania (now Oslo). His father was a lawyer with ambitions for public office and high moral principles, and his mother was an athletic woman. His parents attached great importance to outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing and skiing. Nansen became an experienced skier and prizewinning skater. His parents also deemed moral qualities, such as integrity, independence and courage, to be essential components of their children's education. When Nansen's mother passed away unexpectedly in 1877, the father and his two sons moved to Christiania. In 1880 Nansen passed the entrance exam for the University of Christiania and decided to study zoology, hoping to spend much time outside. While still a student he participated in a naval expedition off the east coast of Greenland to study Arctic zoology first hand, which marked the beginning of his career as an explorer.

During a five-month voyage in 1882 he investigated the formation of sea ice and the location of warm Gulf Stream water underneath the colder surface. When the ship got trapped in the ice, Nansen became interested in exploring Greenland's icecap. After the trip Nansen did not return to university, but was appointed as curator in the zoological department of the Bergen Museum. There he conducted research on the nervous systems of lower vertebrates, an unexplored field of neuroanatomy. This constituted the first step of what would become his doctoral dissertation, completed in 1888, which provided a contribution to modern theories of the nervous system. He used a six-month sabbatical in 1886 to visit several important laboratories in Europe. After the submission of his thesis, he left for an expedition across the Greenland icecap. Nansen had prepared the trip well and proposed to cross Greenland from the uninhabited east to the inhabited west, hence the reverse direction of two previous expeditions carried out by others in 1883 and 1886. The trip was financed through fundraising, as public funding was denied given the risks involved. The team of six accomplished the extremely difficult crossing in 49 days and collected important meteorological and geographical information about the unexplored interior. The group remained another seven months in Greenland and returned to Copenhagen in May 1889, where a huge crowd received the men as national heroes. The achievement contributed to the establishment of the Norwegian Geographical Society that year. Nansen became curator at the Zootomical Institute of the University of Christiania and wrote his account of the expedition. In June he visited London at the invitation of the Royal Geographical Society and met with politicians such as Arthur James Balfour and George Curzon. That summer Nansen announced his engagement to Eva Sars, the daughter of a zoology professor, whom he had met at a skiing resort a few years before and they married one month later.

Out of this trip to the icecap Nansen published two books: *The First Crossing of Greenland* (London 1891) and *Eskimo Life* (London 1894) and prepared another expedition. His plan was to introduce a specially designed ship in the frozen Siberian sea, with the belief that the east-west current would carry the ship into the North Pole. Although various experts argued against his plan, Nansen received financial support from the Norwegian parliament and private donations. In 1893 the polar vessel *Fram* began its drift in the ice, also serving as a laboratory for scientific observations, but its slow progress resulted in the conclusion that the ship would not cross the North Pole. Nansen then decided to prepare a dog sled journey to the pole. In March 1895 Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen started their trip and went farther north than anyone else before. After an adventurous return, in which they had to camp for the winter and then met the British explorer Frederick Jackson by accident, they returned to Christiania in September 1896. They were again celebrated as national heroes. In the meantime the *Fram* had been sighted north and west of Spitsbergen, as Nansen had predicted (although it had not passed over the pole). Nansen was appointed as professor of zoology at the Royal Frederick University in Oslo in 1897 and eventually published six edited volumes based on the observations made during the *Fram* expedition. He became director of the International Laboratory for North Sea Research in 1900 and was a co-founder of ICES, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, established in 1902.

The year 1905 saw the beginning of Nansen's involvement in politics, when he contributed to Norway's independence from the union with Sweden. Because of his newspaper articles in favour of separation and contacts in the country since 1889, Nansen was sent to London as an unofficial diplomat. He presented Norway's legal case for a separate consular service in an article in *The Times*, in interviews and in the book *Norway and the Union with Sweden* (London 1905), published under his name, with contributions by the likes of Eric Colban of the Foreign Ministry. Two referendums in Norway resulted in votes for separation and a monarchy. The government then sent Nansen on a secret mission to persuade the prince of Denmark to accept the Norwegian crown. His success in this endeavour led to his appointment as ambassador of the newly created Norwegian state to the United Kingdom in 1906. Using his contacts he contributed to the signing of the Integrity Treaty by the major European powers in November 1907, which guaranteed Norway's international position. Because his wife was ill with pneumonia, Nansen returned to the family home Polhøgda (Polar Heights) in the Lysaker district, where they had lived since 1902. By the time he arrived she had

already passed away. The government later persuaded him to return to London, but, after a visit of the British King to Norway in April 1908, Nansen retired from the diplomatic service and became professor of oceanography in Oslo. After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 Norway declared its neutrality and Nansen became president of the Norwegian Union of Defence. When shortages of food became pressing as a result of trade restrictions imposed by the United States in 1917, Nansen headed an official Norwegian delegation to Washington DC that sought the relaxation of the allied blockade on food provisions. He negotiated an agreement and signed it himself, when the government hesitated to accept the requested introduction of a rationing system.

During the 1918 Paris Peace Conference Nansen was an observer and lobbied for the recognition of the rights of small states. He became the president of the League of Nations Society in Norway and advocated Norway's membership in the League of Nations (effectuated in 1920). At the first session of the League's Assembly, Nansen acted as one of the three Norwegian delegates. He retained this position until his death and received a government salary that would sustain him throughout his life. The architects of the new institution did not expect to deal with humanitarianism (which was not covered by the League's Covenant), nor did they foresee that postwar health, food and social emergencies would be so dire and massive. Through a joint initiative of League Secretary-General Eric Drummond and Secretariat member Philip Noel-Baker in the spring of 1920 Nansen was asked to set up relief plans for prisoners of war and to expedite the repatriation of two groups, Russians still in Germany and prisoners of war from the Central Powers in Siberia. He had to learn about, coordinate and encourage the work already accomplished on their behalf by governments and organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and to regularly report to the Council. During the following months Nansen, supported by the ICRC, helped to organize repatriation plans for approximately 428,000 prisoners of war from 26 different nationalities, of whom 407,000 were repatriated through the Baltic Sea and railroads, 12,000 via the Black Sea and 9,600 through Vladivostok. The repatriation plans were made possible thanks to his coordination of the work of various organizations providing relief to prisoners of war, mediation among ex-enemy countries and a complex financial scheme, which Nansen helped set up and which was framed within larger projects of postwar national reconstruction. In July Nansen visited Moscow, where he met with Georgy Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and Lev Kamenev, chairman of the Moscow Soviet and a member of the party's five-man ruling Politburo. In a highly ideological context that characterized the divide between bolshevism and the League of Nations (a league of 'capitalist' states), Nansen was received in Moscow on the basis of his scientific success, rather than as a League representative. This and later contacts with Bolshevik, then Soviet, authorities led to accusations (from national delegations to the League and the Russian community abroad who expressed fears about involuntary repatriation) that he was politically naïve, easily manipulated and even pro-Bolshevik. When reporting to the Assembly in November that 200,000 people had returned to their homes, Nansen stated that he had never been brought into touch with such suffering. Contrary to other humanitarians, who came from the missionary tradition or the army, or had had scientific training in medicine or engineering, Nansen was a neophyte to humanitarianism.

While still involved in repatriation plans for prisoners of war, and despite some reluctance from Nansen himself who wished to reintegrate into academia, Nansen obtained the title of High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921. The appointment of a High Commissioner, rather than the creation of a body, paralleled the member states' waning interest in displaced persons and their growing financial and political disengagement. On 27 June the League's Council approved his mandate for one year (and later renewed it on a yearly basis). He was asked to determine the legal status of Russian refugees, to repatriate them or to allow them to find employment in countries of asylum, and to coordinate the efforts already undertaken on their behalf by humanitarian organizations. The office would only address displaced needy Russians and would have to end as soon as possible, while no direct relief would be provided or funded. Nansen began work on 1 September. Almost contemporaneously, through an *ad hoc* conference convened by the ICRC in August 1921, he was appointed High Commissioner of the Geneva Conference for the fight against

famine in Russia. This task was carried out outside the framework of the League, whose member states refused to take over the responsibility. Nansen was the protagonist of the humanitarian film *The Russian Famine (NansenFilm)* (1922), directed by G.H. Mewes for the Swedish Red Cross. Nansen organized European relief efforts for famine-stricken regions of the Volga through the summer of 1923. For this task he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922, while attending the conference of Lausanne. He donated the prize money to international relief efforts and in Oslo delivered a speech on 'The Suffering People of Europe'. However, his major task as High Commissioner of the League remained the refugee question. He proved a centralizing element of governmental and private actions on behalf of refugees by collecting data, converging initiatives, lobbying and negotiating. As such his position embodied humanitarian practises that set the basis for the later international refugee architecture, with international conferences being privileged spaces of negotiation, information sharing and decision making for both governments and international organizations. Upon the suggestion of the League's Secretariat and non-governmental organizations directly engaged with the relief of refugees, Nansen created the Advisory Committee for Private Organizations in September 1921 and gave it the task of consulting with the League's High Commissioner on matters of common interest. He also convened general conferences in August and September 1921. A third one, in July 1922, established a document of identification, which allowed Russian refugees to cross-border legally. At the same time this document became known as 'Nansen passport' and fostered the coordination of governmental efforts, and was extended to Armenian refugees in May 1924. In May 1926 the Nansen passport was modified according to problems raised by its implementation nationally, due to differences in fees and lack of clarity regarding the right to return to the country that had issued it. As a result Russian and Armenian refugees were also legally defined. The Nansen passport was extended to Assyrians, Assyro-Chaldean and Turkish refugees in 1928 and eventually recognized by 52 governments.

The end of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), brought about with the defeat of the Greek army by the Turks and the fire of Smyrna that destroyed much of the city in September 1922, occurred while the Russian refugee question was still far from being settled. On 19 September the League's Assembly authorized Nansen to use the services of the 'Russian refugee organization' to provide assistance for the relief of refugees from the Near East and to administer the money collected for this purpose. The Greek government gave Nansen 'full powers' to proceed with negotiations for the exchange of prisoners of war and detained civilians between Greece and Turkey. In addition, thanks to the backing of the Allied High Commissioners, who had administered the city of Constantinople after the General Armistice of November 1918, he negotiated the terms of the reciprocal exchange of populations. The question then became part of the peace negotiations in Lausanne. Nansen and the leader of the Greek delegation, Eleftherios Venizelos, concurred on the necessity of making an exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey compulsory. Nansen left on an investigative trip to the Near East, accompanied by Noel-Baker and Arthur Salter, head of the League of Nations' Financial Section. In October, while in Athens, he proposed to head all foreign and national organizations under a centralized coordination committee. The latter did not become operational as such, but turned out to be a clearing-house for information through the publication of an *Information Bulletin*. In November Nansen and his staff established a mission in Western Thrace, which relieved and resettled 10,000 refugees. In September 1923 Nansen presented this settlement to the League's Assembly as a model that could be reproduced a number of times in the country. He also argued in favour of an international loan to Greece and wanted the Refugee Settlement Commission, which worked within the framework of the League, to be put under his control. This did not occur and this Commission maintained a large degree of autonomy.

In August 1923 Gabriel Noradounghian, president of the Armenian National Delegation, addressed two letters to the League's Council, reporting the conditions of post-genocide Armenians and asking for the extension of Nansen's mandate to this group. Nansen formulated two plans for the settlement of Armenian refugees to Soviet Armenia and Syria. On 25 September 1924 the Council passed a resolution asking the High Commissioner and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to make a

formal enquiry into the possibilities of creating an Armenian settlement plan in the Caucasus. Two days later Nansen convened a conference in Geneva where it was stated that 300,000 Russian and 200,000 Armenian refugees still needed to be settled. Although repatriation was considered to be the best solution, the opposition of Soviet and Turkish authorities made it almost impossible. Also fighting against the unwillingness of some within the League of Nations' circles to end its involvement in the refugee question, Nansen held private negotiations with ILO Director Albert Thomas in the spring of 1924, because Nansen believed that employment was central to the solution of the refugee question. The arrangement between the League and the ILO came into force on 1 January 1925. While Nansen continued with political negotiations and issues connected with the Nansen passport, the ILO began to find employment for the refugees. In line with Nansen's mandate the ILO would not provide direct relief to refugees and the organization's involvement was to be temporary. Nansen visited Armenia and proposed a settlement scheme with a modest plan for an area where refugees could be settled. The League created a Commission for the Settlement of Armenian refugees, however this body did not produce any concrete results and the proposed settlement scheme was abandoned. When it became evident that the Caucasian settlement scheme could not be implemented, Nansen gave the green light to settlement plans in Syria and Lebanon. In his book *Armenia and the Near East* (London 1928) Nansen expressed reproach for the Western powers of Europe and the United States that had long and unsuccessfully promised the creation of a 'national home' for the Armenians.

In 1929 the League's Assembly decided to bring the service of the High Commissioner under the authority of the Secretary-General and incorporate it into the Secretariat. In early 1930 Nansen's physical condition weakened. He returned to Oslo, where he suffered from influenza and phlebitis and died of a heart attack in his house Polhøgda in May. This pioneer and innovator in fields such as skiing methods, polar expeditions and oceanography became the public face of the League of Nations' humanitarian work, based on his international reputation, diplomatic skills and genuine (some say heroic) interest in alleviating the suffering of people in distress. He is mostly remembered as the champion of Russian and Armenian refugees, then refugees *tout court*, for the entire decade leading up to his death. In a lecture given at the University of St. Andrews, where the students had elected him as (honorary) rector in 1926, Nansen advised them to always go forward, never retreat. This seems to have been the perspective that he brought to humanitarianism based on his previous Arctic enterprises. Without completely dismissing this interpretation, revisionist narratives point out the danger of such over-simplification in examining historical events and actors. Being at the forefront of humanitarianism fits Nansen's multi-talented, complex and narcissistic personality and by the time of his appointment he was already used to and acquainted with 'celebrity'. Moreover, a strong and internationally known public face was the only way to overcome the intermittent interest that the League of Nations and its most prominent member states showed towards humanitarian matters. In 1931 the League of Nations honoured him by setting up the Nansen International Office for Refugees. In 1954 the United Nations established the Nansen Medal, renamed the Nansen Refugee Award, given to those who have significantly contributed to alleviating the suffering of refugees. In 1968 Sergei Mikaelyan directed a film of Nansen's life, called *Bare et Liv: Historien om Fridtjof Nansen* (Just as Life: The Story of Fridtjof Nansen).

January 2017: title added to Literature

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