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*Pour mon collègue de l'université d'Athènes, Hervé Georgelin, éminent chercheur et traducteur pour tant de sujets qui m'intéressent, à commencer par Smyrne, mais aussi pour les populations non musulmanes de l'Empire ottoman, Juifs, Arméniens et autres chrétiens orientaux de notre temps, sujets abordés diulement, grâce à une précieuse polyglotie,*

# The Righteous and People of Conscience of the Armenian Genocide

*en très amical hommage, et en souvenir des rencontres avec mon père, Charles Dédéyan, gardien, avec son frère Christian, de la mémoire de Smyrne,*

*Montpellier, le 4 mars 2024*

*Gérard Dédéyan*

Preface by

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## FRIDTJOF NANSEN (1861–1930)

*Polymath who devoted his exceptional talents to aiding survivors of the genocide expelled by Turkey and all stateless peoples*

*The plight of the Armenian refugees*

Born in Norway in 1861, Fridtjof Nansen initially gained renown as an intrepid Arctic explorer, record-breaking athlete and hugely gifted zoologist and research scientist. Later in life, he also played a key role in the fate of thousands of survivors of the Armenian genocide who had been left homeless, helpless and hopeless. In the 1920s, thousands of Armenians who had survived the deportation marches were still scattered in the countries around Turkey, including Russian Armenia, Iran and Syria, without any clear idea of where their future lay.

Outraged by their fate, Nansen, who in 1921 was appointed high commissioner for refugees by the League of Nations, did everything in his power to find legitimate ways to improve the conditions of the Armenian survivors of what he described as 'humanity's greatest tragedy'. In the preface to his book *Armenia and the Near East*, published in English in 1928, he declared that he could not imagine how anyone could remain unmoved by the fate of the Armenians:

I feel sure that no one can study the story of this remarkable people without being profoundly moved by their tragic fate. In spite of a disheartening consciousness of the defects in my presentation of their case, I hope that the facts themselves will speak from these pages to the conscience of Europe and America.

Nansen occupies a special place in this period following the genocide: it is no coincidence that Armenia now has schools and streets named after him, for his courage and compassion remain a continuing source of inspiration for millions. A pioneer in many fields, Nansen left a significant mark on history.

*Scientific training and exploration*

Nansen's family background and education were clearly a formative influence on his worldview. His father, Baldur Nansen, was a lawyer and reporter to the Norwegian Supreme Court. His mother, Adelaide Wedel-Jarlsberg, was the niece of the Swedish king's Norwegian viceroy, who had helped draft the Norwegian Constitution of 1814. Fridtjof spent his childhood with his parents in rural Store Frøen and Christiania, later Oslo. As Roland Huntford observes in his biography of Nansen, the rural character of Store Frøen was a major influence on Nansen's childhood and his future choices. He excelled at sports and loved nature, while his studies took second place. It was a childhood that developed a marked degree of self-reliance in the young Fridtjof.

In 1881, Nansen enrolled at the Royal Frederick University in Christiania to study zoology. After working in the field in the Arctic seas, he chose to specialize in the relatively new field of neuro-anatomy, and more specifically the study of the central nervous system of lower marine animals. Through his conclusions, published in a number of journals, Nansen became a co-founder of modern neuron theory. Like his compatriot and contemporary Roald Amundsen, who perished on a rescue mission in the Arctic in 1928, Nansen was a great and intrepid explorer: after crossing Greenland in 1888, he explored the Arctic by using polar drift in his specially constructed ship, *Fram*, setting off in 1893 and returning in triumph in 1895 after an epic polar trek by sledge to reach a record farthest north latitude.

*Entry into political and diplomatic life*

On his return from the *Fram* expedition, Nansen embarked on a brilliantly successful political and diplomatic career. From 1905,

supported by the Norwegian people, he was involved in the separation of Norway from Sweden and held successful negotiations with Prince Charles of Denmark to persuade him to accept the throne of the newly independent Norway. This was to be the beginning of a career as diplomat and statesman, at a time of extreme tension on the eve of the First World War. From 1906 to 1908, Nansen worked with European ambassadors in London to draw up a treaty that would fully guarantee Norway's independent status under a monarchical regime, with Prince Charles of Denmark chosen by referendum as Haakon VII (1905–57).

*High commissioner for refugees and Nobel laureate*

After the war, the League of Nations (forerunner of the United Nations, which was established in 1945) was founded by the Paris Peace Conference on 10 January 1920 and was based in Geneva from 1920 to 1946. Nansen devoted his energies to the League from the outset, transforming the lives of thousands of people through his tireless work, and gaining the support of Norway and the other Scandinavian countries. That same year, the Norwegian government appointed Nansen as a delegate to the League, a position he held until his death in 1930. There can be no doubt that Nansen saw the organization as a new beacon of hope for humanity.

In 1921, Nansen was appointed the first high commissioner for refugees. Post-war Europe was about to find itself at a particularly difficult juncture, as it had to find a way to define the status of the 1.5 million Russians who had fled the Soviet regime after the October Revolution and whose nationality had been revoked by Lenin in 1922. To describe their predicament, jurists coined the term 'stateless'.

Under the 1922 decree, Russians living outside the country were required to recognize the new regime and register at a Soviet consulate within three months, failing which they would be stripped of their citizenship. This unprecedented move led to the first undocumented migrant problem in Europe. In addition to the tragic position of thousands of prisoners of war, the problems of Russians who had had their property confiscated and suffered persecution had to be dealt with—and all this amid the early stages of a famine that was to prove catastrophic.

The League of Nations chose Nansen to lead the rapid repatriation or resettlement of Russians living outside their homeland. Faced with the need to repatriate hundreds of thousands of refugees, Nansen sought to obtain a legal status for them that would not only ensure their protection but also enable them to support themselves. In his article 'Le passeport Nansen, première protection des réfugiés dans l'histoire du droit international' (The Nansen Passport, the first protection for refugees in the history of international law), Jean-Pierre Dubois argues that Nansen was the first to understand that one of the most pressing and very real issues for refugees was the fact that they had no internationally valid documents proving their identity or nationality, which meant they were unable to apply for asylum or cross national borders. As high commissioner for refugees for the League of Nations, Nansen led an inter-governmental conference on identity documents for Russian refugees who had been forced to flee their country after the civil war, and as part of this initiative he assembled a team of stateless Russian jurists to consider the rights and duties that should be attached to these documents.

In 1922, in recognition of this work, Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The citation referred to 'his work for the repatriation of the prisoners of war, his work for the Russian refugees, his work to bring succour to the millions of Russians afflicted by famine, and finally his present work for the refugees in Asia Minor and Thrace'.

#### *The 'Nansen Passport'*

Working with his team, Nansen created what would become known as the 'Nansen Passport', which for the first time provided international legal protection for stateless refugees and enabled them to cross borders. By as early as 1924, this document had received recognition from some forty states. Thanks to it, Russian refugees were able to travel to Paris, Berlin, New York and even Shanghai, where they presented themselves to Russian Refugee Committees with their 'passports', valid for one year and renewable for life.

Initially created for Russian refugees, the Nansen Passport was extended to include Armenians, among other groups, by the Geneva

Convention of 1933. After the genocide of 1915, the Armenians had been driven into the Syrian desert without any protection or support. Nansen had fiercely criticized Turkey on more than one occasion, notably in several passages in *Armenia and the Near East*:

Then, in June 1915, the horrors began to which we know no parallel in history. From all the villages and towns of Cilicia, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia the Armenian Christians were driven forth on their death march; the work was done systematically, clearing out one district after another, whether the population happened to be near the scene of war or hundreds of kilometres away from it. There was to be a clean sweep of all Armenians.

Some 300,000 Armenian survivors of the massacres were left homeless and without any documentation. These refugees could not return to Turkey, nor did they have their own national state. Deeply concerned about the fate of the Armenians, Nansen was tireless in his efforts to find legitimate solutions to this crisis.

Arguing their cause with impassioned conviction, he initially sought to set up an irrigation system in the Mesopotamian desert to which the Armenians had been deported. At the Paris Peace Conference (January 1919–January 1920), the Armenian national delegation and the delegation of the Republic of Armenia (1918–20) demanded recognition, in a memorandum of 12 February 1919, of 'an independent Armenian State, formed by the union of the seven vilayets and Cilicia with the territories of the Republic of the Caucasus'.

#### *The refugee settlement programme in Soviet Armenia*

After the failure of the proposed American mandate on Armenia, Nansen's objective became the creation of a national home for refugees within the borders of the Republic of Armenia, where the Soviets had seized power in December 1920. As head of the commission for repatriation of the Armenians from 1925 to 1929, Nansen did everything possible to facilitate the return of refugees to what was now Soviet Armenia. He headed a visiting delegation to Armenia and, with the support of the Soviet authorities and the help of the International Red Cross and Near East Relief, was able to carry out an investigation in Yerevan. Thanks to the brilliant



reputation he had earned through his scientific work, Nansen was welcomed to Armenia and shown the highest honours by the Soviet authorities. Wherever they went, the delegates were welcomed by Armenians of all social backgrounds with an extraordinary degree of hospitality, and Nansen was impressed by how they had managed to create order and even comfort out of chaos, poverty and hunger. But amid the magnificence of the landscapes and the generosity of the refugees he met, he was constantly aware of their sufferings, as he described in *Armenia and the Near East*:

Away in the south Mount Ararat could be clearly seen in all its tremendous height, its broad cupola of snow shining brightly in the sunset. . . . And past us trooped a never-ending pageant of the changing fortunes of bygone generations who lived on these self-same plains under the shadow of Ararat and Alagoz. So many wars and struggles, such dire straits, so much suffering and misery over and over again—and so seldom a victory. . . . Has any people in any part of the world suffered as this one has done? And to what end?

On its return, the commission drew up a report that recommended the settlement in Yerevan of some 25,000 Armenian workers, mostly from Constantinople and with a minority from Greece. However, in order to put this plan into action, the report pointed out, the necessary funds would have to be raised. The Soviet government supported Nansen's proposal but insisted that since the country was still ravaged by the aftermath of revolution and civil war, it was essential that it should receive economic support. Nansen stressed this point in his report, pointing out that since so many promises around the Armenian question had not been honoured, it was the moral duty of European countries to provide material aid. He was convinced that, if aid was implemented in a rigorous fashion, Soviet Armenia would be able to take in some 25–30,000 refugees.

When the League of Nations refused to provide any financial aid, Nansen was scathing in his response:

The nations of Europe and the statesmen of Europe are tired of the everlasting Armenian question. Of course. It has only brought them one defeat after another, the very mention of it recalling to their slumbering consciences a grim tale of broken or unfulfilled promises

which they have never in practice done anything to keep. And after all, it was only a massacred, but gifted little nation, with no oil-fields or gold-mines.

A fresh appeal by Nansen in 1927 elicited a more positive response from the member countries of the League of Nations. In 1928, he was able to settle 7,000 refugees in Armenia. But a 1929 agreement by which a further 12,000 Armenians were to be settled in the country was eventually annulled, a bitter disappointment that drove Nansen to demand that the League should cease to take part in these repatriation operations. Already in Geneva in 1927 he had lamented that when it came to carrying out the promises made to the Armenian survivors, 'Nothing has been done, absolutely nothing.'

Nansen embarked on tours and wrote reports, not only to raise state funds but also to try to secure donations from private benefactors. In 1928, he embarked on a lecture tour of the United States, and in that year he managed to raise enough money to launch his modest project.

He also successfully petitioned the League of Nations to grant the Armenians the same rights to Nansen Passports as Russian stateless refugees. Since France had a mandate over regions—in particular Lebanon—that were home to thousands of Armenians, many of the survivors set sail for Marseille.

Nansen devoted numerous articles, reports and speeches to the Armenian people and Armenia, and in 1927 his book *Gjennem Armenia* was published in Norwegian and soon translated into English (as *Armenia and the Near East*), French and German. He continued to condemn the failures of Western governments:

But the Young Turks have done what they set out to do; they have wiped out the Armenian population of Anatolia, and can say with Tala'at Pasha that the Armenian question *n'existe plus*. No European or American Government or statesman troubles now about what has happened; to them the everlasting Armenian problem seems finally and definitely obliterated in blood.

In conclusion, he offered a bitter lament: 'Woe to the Armenians, that they were ever drawn into European politics! It would have been better for them if the name of Armenia had never been uttered by any European diplomatist.'

After Nansen's death in 1930, the League of Nations established the Nansen International Office for Refugees in his honour, which in 1938 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1954, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established the Nansen Refugee Award, to be granted annually to 'those who have gone beyond the call of duty, who have demonstrated perseverance and courage, and who have personally, directly and significantly helped forcibly displaced people'. The award is bestowed by the governments of Norway and Switzerland, and laureates—the first of whom was Eleanor Roosevelt—receive the Nansen Medal and a prize of \$150,000.

A great and faithful friend to the Armenian people, Nansen never gave up hope that the refugees would find a national home. Following the failure of his plan to return Armenian refugees to Soviet Armenia, he withdrew from the League of Nations. Despite this failure, he is still remembered in Armenia with the highest respect.

Fridtjof Nansen was awarded many honours and recognitions in his lifetime; in death, he was honoured with a state funeral.

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