

# Alfred Bernhard Nobel and the Peace Prize

by  
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**A**lfred Nobel died on 10 December 1896. His last will and testament is dated 27 November 1895. This famous document is drafted in Swedish and includes *inter alia* the following provisions:

“...one part [one fifth of the annual returns on the assets of the Foundation] [shall be apportioned] to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses. (...)

The prize (...) for champions of peace (...) [shall be awarded] by a committee of five persons to be elected by the Norwegian Storting.

It is my express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not.”<sup>1</sup>

The will is a remarkable document in many respects, considering that it was written at a time when nationalism was at its peak. As we shall see, it was certainly a provocation to Swedish national feelings at the time.

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Alfred Nobel was not a happy person. His many private letters confirm the picture of a lonely, ascetic man in bad health, burdened with work and hypochondria. He was a man of high morals, often helpful but never showing off. He shunned high society, and ridiculed vanity and outward fineries. Politically and in religious issues, he was a radical. He considered himself a social democrat. He was fluent in five languages and was often drastically outspoken. His relatives remembered him as a warm-hearted uncle, generous, and thoughtful in his choice of gifts. He appreciated a joke and enjoyed a good meal. Sometimes he expressed envy at the harmonious family life of his brothers.

I shall dwell on two questions: Why did the donator institute a peace prize and why was it to be awarded by a body of the Parliament of Norway, whereas the other prizes were entrusted to non-political Swedish institutions? These questions have given rise to much speculation. There are a few clues that may help to draw convincing conclusions.

### The wars

Alfred Nobel lived in an era when terrible wars of appalling cruelty were fought between nations that called themselves civilized. The suffering caused by those wars cried out for humanitarian action. The Crimean War lasted for three years, from 1853 to 1856. During it the humanitarian work pioneered by Florence Nightingale diminished the suffering and saved the lives of many wounded British soldiers. France under Napoleon III attacked the Austrians and defeated them in the bloody battles of Magenta and Solferino in 1859. The young Henry Dunant described the horrors of Solferino in one of the most moving works of war journalism that has ever been written and thus prompted the founding of the Red Cross. The American Civil War went on for four years, from 1861 to 1865. Prussia, led by Bismark, waged wars with Denmark, Austria and Italy, and in 1870-71 with

<sup>1</sup> The relevant part of Alfred Nobel's will has been incorporated in the Statutes of the Nobel Foundation (§ 1), <[www.nobel.se/nobel-foundation/statutes.html](http://www.nobel.se/nobel-foundation/statutes.html)>.

France. Yet another war was fought between Russia and Turkey in 1877-78. It is enough to mention just some of the major wars. Towards the end of that century, European imperialism culminated in the colonization of non-European countries, often with ruthless brutality. No wonder that States maintained big standing armies and that every generation of Europeans expected war during their lifetime. Many young men, in particular those of the aristocracy, believed that to die on a battlefield was glorious and thought the military profession honourable.

That certainly was not the view of Alfred Nobel. In a letter to one of his brothers, rejecting the idea that he should write down his biographical data, he said: "...No one reads articles about persons other than actors and murderers, preferably the latter, whether they have performed their deeds on the battlefield or indoors in a manner to make people gape."<sup>2</sup>

### A man of peace after all

From his youth Alfred Nobel was seriously interested in literature and pacifism. He was well informed about world events of the time, ideas and philosophy. He was also well read, particularly in French and English literature. The politically radical and pacifist writings of Percy B. Shelley (1792-1822) in many respects reflected his own thinking. In a letter to a Belgian pacifist, he described his dream of a world at peace in terms of classical allegories. He continued: "The more I hear of the thunder of the cannon, the more blood I see shed, plundering being legalized and the gun sanctioned, the more alive and intensive becomes this dream of mine." At the same time he wrote to an English friend, a clergyman, that he harboured "a serious wish to see a rose-red peace grow up in this explosive world."<sup>3</sup> Alfred Nobel abhorred violence and conflict.

Nevertheless, for most of his life he was involved in developing and producing explosives and ammunition. At the outbreak of the Crimean War, after a long study trip to Western Europe and the United States, he returned to his father's laboratory in St Petersburg.

<sup>2</sup> Ragnar Sohlman, *Ett testamente*, Stockholm, 1950, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Sven Tägil, "Krig och fred i Alfred Nobels

föreställningsavärd", in John Rosén (ed.), *Alfred Nobel, hans far och hans bröder*,

Stockholm, 1995, pp. 77-90.

There he worked and experimented together with his two elder brothers Robert and Ludvig Nobel. The Nobels contributed significantly to the naval defence of Russia against the threat of the British Navy by their invention of underwater mines, which was put to effective practical use. Indeed, the British admiral Sir Charles Napier explained his partial failures in the Gulf of Finland by stating that it “was full of infernal machines”. In a letter to a friend, Alfred complained that he was doing more work for the “Tsar than for God”. Later his father, Immanuel Nobel, published a magnificent work about the invention, including his own water-colour illustrations and explanations in French most probably written by Alfred himself: “*Système de défense maritime pour passages et ports sans fortifications dispendieuses et avec épargne d'hommes*”. A defensive system to save the lives of the defenders!

The methods for the use of dynamite developed by Alfred Nobel were for civilian purposes and made possible enormous projects such as the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal, or the railroad passage through the Swiss Alps (Gotthard Tunnel). However, according to hearsay the Germans used dynamite in the war of 1870 against France.

In 1887 he applied for a patent for his new and more complicated product which revolutionized the military technology of explosives. It was a new powder much more powerful than the previous one and almost free of the smoke which frequently blinded combatants in the old days. It was named ballistite (in Swedish *Nobelkrut*).<sup>4</sup>

Then in 1894 he bought a gun factory, Bofors, in Western Sweden. One of his goals was to obtain better conditions for experiments with new explosives and guns than those available in San Remo, where he had his home during the latter years of his life. Nobel observed that these factories offered excellent opportunities which it would have been a pity to waste. He also expressed the view that a national defence necessitated a national defence industry. Furthermore he envisioned that the Swedish arms industry under his management would be able to compete in the international market with those of England and Germany. At the same time he dissociated

<sup>4</sup> *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bind 27.131, p. 106.

himself from other arms producers. Referring to them, he once wrote to a friend: "I wish a new Mephisto might turn up and enrich hell with these evildoers."<sup>5</sup> Obviously he saw his own motives as those of an inventor and therefore different from those of arms producers.

This is a classic dilemma well known to all those who hope and work for peace and at the same time believe that as things stand, maintaining a national defence is inevitable. It brings to my mind a statement in a lecture given by a high-ranking officer: "A national defence preconditions a national defence industry, but too heavy an arms industry limits the freedom of action of the State." In his view, keeping up the competitive quality of the defence industry requires research and development, which in turn requires arms exports to guarantee profitability. Importing countries then often demand, on grounds of reciprocity, to export the weaponry they themselves produce to their counterparts. Thus a dangerous spiral is easily developed when a proper balance is not achieved.

While Alfred Nobel, particularly in his later years, undoubtedly was involved in developing and manufacturing advanced explosives and weapons, there is no indication that his dream of peace faded or disappeared. The occasional tentative assumption that he donated the peace prize because of a bad conscience is not supported by evidence. Therefore we do not know for sure whether it is correct or not. His personality was complicated and thus defies any oversimplified analysis. What we do know is that he did believe in the deterrent effect of modern weapons of destruction and in what came to be known, long after his day and age, as the "balance of terror".

These views were often expressed in his extensive correspondence with the Austrian pacifist Bertha von Suttner. It is important to remember that Alfred Nobel was himself a pacifist before he met her. However, the exchange of ideas between them and their differences in opinion towards the end of his life, not about goals but about ways and means, may well have influenced his thinking and the wording of his last will.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* About the years in San Remo see Giovanni Lotti, *Nobel a San Remo*, San Remo, 1980.

### The role of Bertha von Suttner

In the spring 1876 Alfred Nobel, then aged 42, published the following advertisement in a Vienna journal:

“A very rich, highly educated elderly gentleman, living in Paris, seeks a lady likewise of a mature age, with a good knowledge of languages, as secretary and to be responsible for the household.”

It was answered by an Austrian Countess, Bertha Kinsky von Chinic und Tettau. She was at that time nearing her 33rd birthday and engaged to Baron Arthur von Suttner. This engagement and relationship was kept a secret because her aristocratic family considered it an unacceptable *mésalliance*.

After an exchange of letters Bertha Kinsky visited Paris, where she was well received by Alfred Nobel. Both enjoyed their correspondence and conversations, but after only a week she suddenly left Paris. She then married her fiancé, whereupon the Von Suttners lived in a sort of exile in the Caucasus for almost ten years before a reconciliation with her family made their return to Austria possible. During their Caucasian years Arthur von Suttner became a skilful photographer, while his wife developed into an author good enough to win recognition and success. She was also a fervent pacifist. Through all the years Bertha and Alfred continued their correspondence. Some writers have insinuated that Bertha fled from Paris in order to avoid obtrusive attentions on the part of Alfred, but such behaviour would be entirely uncharacteristic of his reserved and controlled manner. Nor have such insinuations been supported by quotations from Bertha's memoirs. Rather she obeyed the dictates of her heart and her compassion, as according to one of her biographers Arthur von Suttner was consumed by jealousy during her stay in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

Although the issues of peace or war were certainly touched upon from the beginning of their dialogue, it was only after publication of her novel *Die Waffen nieder!* (Down with Arms) in 1889 that they were more systematically addressed in their correspondence. But Alfred Nobel's first letter congratulating her was only polite. Later his tone was sadly ironic. This was in September 1891, when

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Wintersteiner, *Die Baronin Bertha von Suttner*, Wien, 1984, p. 106.

Bertha von Suttner had published an enthusiastic appeal against war and rearmament. Nobel responded, this time in English:

“Delighted I am to see, that your eloquent pleading against that horror of horrors, war, has found its way into the French press. But I fear that out of French readers ninety-nine in a hundred are chauvinistically mad. The Government here is almost in their senses; the people on the contrary is getting success — and vanity drunk. A pleasant kind of intoxication, much less delirious — unless it leads to war — than spirits of wine and morphia! And your pen? Whither is it wandering now? After writing with the blood of the martyrs of war will it show us the prospect of a future fairy-land or the less utopian picture of the thinkers’ commonwealth? My sympathies are in that direction, but my thoughts are mostly wandering towards another commonwealth, where silenced souls are misery-proof.”<sup>7</sup>

A few weeks later that year she approached Alfred Nobel for a financial contribution to the peace propaganda campaign. He sent a sum of money but also a critical letter, this time in French:

*“Ce n’est pas l’argent, je crois, mais le programme qui fait défaut. Les vœux seuls n’assurent pas la paix. On peut en dire autant de grands diners avec grand discours. Il faudrait pouvoir présenter aux gouvernements bien-intentionnés un projet acceptable. Demander le désarmement, c’est presque se rendre ridicule sans profit pour personne. Demander la constitution immédiate d’un tribunal d’arbitrage, c’est se heurter à mille préjugés et faire un obstrucateur de tout ambitieux. Il faudrait pour réussir se contenter de commencements plus modestes... [Here the letter suggests concrete examples of short-term, step by step measures considered as more realistic by its author who continues:] Ce sera alors seulement qu’on pourra utilement songer à procéder peu à peu au désarmement que désirent tous les honnêtes gens et presque tous les gouvernements. Et supposez que malgré tout une querelle éclate entre deux gouvernements: ne pensez-vous pas qu’ils se calmeront neuf fois sur dix durant l’armistice obligatoire qu’ils auraient à subir ?”<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> On Alfred Nobel and the peace movement see *Alfred Nobel och hans släkt*, Memorial Publication by the Nobel

Foundation, Stockholm, 1926, pp. 216-229.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* — “To my mind, what is wanting is not money but the programme itself. Wishes

In August 1892 a peace congress convened in Berne, Switzerland. Bertha von Suttner was one of the key people there. Alfred Nobel turned up, but left again without having really participated. I cannot help feeling that his hearing must have been affected by many years of experimentation with explosives. Trying to listen to speeches at the conference may not have been very rewarding, and there were no audio-visual aids in those days. Anyway, Alfred Nobel and Bertha von Suttner met shortly afterwards in Zurich. He is said to have told her: “My factories may put an end to war sooner than your congresses. The very day when two army corps can annihilate each other within one second, would not all civilized nations shrink back from a war and dismiss their troops?”

That was the last meeting between Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Nobel. In 1905 she was awarded the Peace Prize.

### **Alfred Nobel takes action**

After the Berne conference Nobel decided to act on his own. He employed an experienced Turkish ex-diplomat, Aristarchi Bey, to keep him informed about the peace work in Europe and, as his representative, to actively support it through the press and in various gatherings. Nobel’s exchange of ideas with the politically well-versed Aristarchi influenced his thinking in an even more realistic direction. He developed a plan for a “League of Peoples”, thereby rejecting the idea of an international tribunal, as the execution of any such body’s decision would require armed forces. Bertha von Suttner was not impressed. She wrote, in German: “Your last letter describes the doubts

alone do not ensure peace. The same can be said of grandiose dinners with grandiose speeches. There would have to be an acceptable project that can be submitted to well-intentioned governments. To call for disarmament is virtually to make oneself ridiculous without helping anyone. To call for the immediate constitution of a court of arbitration means having to contend with a thousand forms of prejudice and turning anyone ambitious against it. In order to succeed, you

would have to make do with a more modest start. [...] Only then would a gradual advance towards the disarmament that all decent people and almost all governments desire be conceivable. And what if a dispute nonetheless flares between two governments: do you not think that nine times out of ten they will calm down during the compulsory armistice which they would have to observe?” (ICRC translation)



of your Turkish friend concerning the feasibility of courts of arbitration. These doubts are well known to us “peace professionals” and your refutation is...refuted(!)” — Aristarchi Bey’s employment contract was terminated after only one year, although Alfred Nobel liked him.

Alfred Nobel often stated that mere manifestations of good will are not enough. His mind worked in terms of concepts such as prolonged armistices, partial disarmament and moratoria, as well as formalized conflict management. He emphasized the necessity of fighting not just war but poverty, prejudice, intolerance, injustice and dishonesty as well. He maintained, however, that the most effective way to prevent war would be joint military action against a nation that violated peace.

Alfred Nobel was incredibly rich. His financial empire included factories and companies in more than 90 countries on three continents. He turned his mind to how this enormous fortune could best be put to use for the benefit of mankind. In a letter to Bertha von Suttner in January 1893 he mentions plans to institute a peace prize. The outcome of them is well known. There were previous wills, one of which was dated 14 March 1893. It is interesting to compare that document with the final one. According to the earlier version, 37 per cent of the property left by him should go to a number of relatives and friends and to a few institutions, among them the *Österreichische Gesellschaft der Friedensfreunde* (Austrian Society of Friends of Peace) in Vienna, “to be used for the promotion of peace initiatives”. The remaining and larger part should go to the Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, of which Alfred Nobel was a member. The annual dividends were to be distributed as awards for the most important and pioneering discoveries or intellectual works “...within the wide domain of knowledge and progress. Without making an absolute condition, it is my wish that one should particularly consider those who, through their writs or actions, can succeed in combating the peculiar prejudice still harboured both by nations and by governments against the establishment of a European peace tribunal.”

If we compare this text with the final will cited at the beginning of this paper, we shall see among other changes that the reference to a European peace tribunal was dropped, as well as most of

the bequests to relatives and other individuals. It is also clear that the provision mandating the Norwegian Parliament to award the special peace prize came at a later stage. Why?

### The Norwegian-Swedish Union

For centuries Norway had been a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. In 1810 the Swedish Parliament elected a French general and marshal, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, heir to the Swedish throne. He then became Crown Prince Karl Johan and the founder of the present royal dynasty in Sweden. Swedish troops under Karl Johan's command had joined the victorious forces in the battle of Leipzig in 1813 where Napoleon was defeated. Karl Johan then turned north and in two swift campaigns conquered Norway. The latter campaign took place in 1814; it was the last time that Sweden was involved in war. It could be said that the successful French warrior brought Norway as a wedding gift to his Swedish bride, but no one asked the Norwegians how they felt about it. According to the peace treaties, Norway formed a union with Sweden under the Swedish king but under the rule of its own parliament and laws. However, disputes developed between the two parts of the Union. The crisis took a very serious turn in 1895, that same year in which Alfred Nobel drew up his final will.

Contention arose *inter alia* about influence on foreign policy and representation, division of economic burdens and the independence of the Norwegian Parliament (*Stortinget*). This assembly had been overruled by its counterpart in Stockholm. Celebrated for his firm position towards the Norwegians, the Swedish King Oscar II commissioned a secret committee composed only of conservatives who favoured a hard line. They recommended that the Union be kept intact and unchanged and that the military budget be increased. The Swedish Parliament (*Riksdagen*) acted accordingly. Years of tension and difficulties then followed and there were more than a few people on both sides who not only hoped but actively prepared for a fratricidal war between Norwegians and Swedes. Finally, in 1905, Norway unilaterally dissolved the Union. Sweden accepted the *fait accompli* without waging a war.

Alfred Nobel of course knew what the situation was in Scandinavia when he drew up his will and entrusted the Peace Prize to the Norwegian Parliament. Whereas they promptly accepted the responsibility when the contents of the testament became known, others resisted, so that after the death of Alfred Nobel five years elapsed before the first prize-giving ceremony could take place.

### Resistance

His last will and testament was first made public in January 1897. The news was received with enormous enthusiasm in many countries, including Sweden. But soon clouds started to gather. Alfred Nobel, who did not trust any lawyers after having quite unfairly lost an important lawsuit, wrote his will without the assistance of a lawyer. The document was therefore far from straightforward to interpret and execute. The first problem was where he should be considered to have had his domicile, since he had homes in France, Italy and Sweden. Difficulties were created by his business partners, shareholders, creditors whether false or genuine, borrowers and even the governments of several countries where he had his assets. It takes at least a book to describe how all these obstacles were overcome by the two young collaborators to whom Alfred Nobel had assigned this task in his will. The foremost of them, Ragnar Sohlman, later wrote such a book.<sup>9</sup>

Some members of the family wanted to challenge the will's validity. The eldest brother, Robert Nobel, had left Russia and settled in Sweden in 1880 for reasons of health but also because of some setback in the Russian oil business originally run jointly by the three brothers. He had died a few months before Alfred. His eldest son Hjalmar Nobel had then become the head of what was referred to as the Swedish branch of the family. The second brother Ludvig had died earlier, in 1888; most of his numerous children and their families, who remained in Russia until driven out by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, constituted the Russian branch. They were headed by Ludvig's eldest son, Emmanuel Nobel. Hjalmar Nobel and the Swedish branch threatened to challenge the will in court with the aim of having its

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.* (note 2).

provisions amended so as to secure for the relatives a portion of the property bequeathed. Conversely Emmanuel Nobel, followed by the members of the Russian branch, declared his uncle's will and testament to be inviolable in every detail thereof. He then gave the executors named in the will his full and unreserved support. After some time a settlement was negotiated between the two branches of the family and the executors, granting the Swedish branch a sum of money amounting to approximately six per cent of all the property bequeathed, whereupon they consented to approve the will.

Some of the Swedish institutions initially hesitated to take on a task they considered a burden for which they were neither intended nor suited. But the most negative reactions came from King Oscar II and the most nationalist and chauvinist circles. They had no understanding for the provision that non-Swedish nationals should receive awards. They felt that this would undermine the national spirit so dear to them. The King, who was deeply disappointed at what he saw as a complete lack of gratitude and respect from his Norwegian subjects, found it an insult that the Norwegian Parliament should be honoured with the task of awarding the peace prize. There is a family story that Emmanuel Nobel was summoned to the King, who urged him to join the branch of the family that contested the will so that the most annoying provisions could be altered. The King even promised Emmanuel the most distinguished order of the realm if he complied with the royal request.

Five years later, however, the first prize ceremonies took place in Stockholm and in Oslo on 10 December 1901. In Stockholm the Nobel Prize laureates received their award from the hand of the King. In Oslo the ceremony was less formal.

### **Some winners of the Nobel Prize for Peace**

The first Peace Prize was shared between Henry Dunant and Frédéric Passy. Dunant and the International Committee of the Red Cross he helped to found are more than well known. Frédéric Passy (1822-1912) is less clearly remembered today. He was a French citizen, a genuine pacifist who worked for peace most of his life. It is recorded that in 1905 he publicly warned against the fortifications installed at the border between Sweden and Norway. Luckily they were

torn down. Passy should be remembered above all because he was one of the two founders of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an organization doing useful work to this day and with its headquarters — like the ICRC — in Geneva.

A review of how the Nobel Committee of the Norwegian Parliament have performed their task during the first 99 years brings interesting facts to light. The first is that on eighteen of those 99 occasions no Peace Prize was awarded at all. These interruptions occurred not only during the two world wars but also intermittently between and after them. The other Nobel prizes have not been suspended so often. This is an indication of the difficulty to find worthy Peace Prize laureates.

Another observation to be made is that the prize has often been awarded not to individuals but to international organizations, both intergovernmental and non-governmental. This also makes the Peace Prize different from the other Nobel prizes. It was for example awarded to the ICRC three times, in 1917, 1944 and 1963 (the last time it was shared with the League — now the International Federation — of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). The prize was awarded twice to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 1954 and 1981, and once to Amnesty International in 1972. This practice can be disputed, but it has been a source of encouragement for all those working hard for the organizations thus distinguished.

Among the people who have received the award there are famous names as well as others that have largely been forgotten. Not surprisingly, the list of laureates includes individuals who did not deserve the prize. Other names are missing. It may be wondered why the Peace Prize was never given to Mahatma Gandhi, the originator of *Sathyagraha*, non-violent civil disobedience. Among them there are various kinds of people, ranging from presidents, politicians and others in power to saintly individuals living and acting by the codes of their spiritual beliefs. The Nobel Committee has even encouraged a struggle for freedom and justice by awarding the prize to Albert Luthuli (1960), Desmond Tutu (1984) and Nelson Mandela (1993), all from South Africa.

In the seventies, the Norwegian Nobel Committee was much criticized for giving the prize to persons from States which had not made peace until they were exhausted by war. Thus, in 1973 the Peace Prize was to be shared by Henry Kissinger (USA) and Lê Đức Thọ (Vietnam). The latter refused to receive the prize, the only one so far to do so. Furthermore, in 1978 the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat also shared the prize.

Looking back at my personal summary I dare say that the Peace Prize has done much more good than harm, by giving well-deserved prominence and encouragement to the endless work for humanitarian values and peace. That is needed today as much as ever!



## *Résumé*

### **Alfred Bernhard Nobel et le Prix Nobel de la Paix**

par PETER NOBEL

*Par son testament (daté du 27 novembre 1895), Alfred Nobel a établi, entre autres, un prix pour récompenser un effort particulier en faveur de la paix : le Prix Nobel de la Paix. L'auteur de l'article (un descendant de la famille Nobel) rappelle qu'Alfred Nobel était impressionné par les multiples guerres qui ont caractérisé la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Certains prétendent que la création d'un prix pour la paix n'était qu'un geste pour calmer la mauvaise conscience d'un homme qui avait acquis une partie de son immense fortune grâce à l'industrie de l'armement. Pourtant, très tôt, Alfred Nobel a montré une réelle sympathie pour les mouvements en faveur de la paix (les contacts avec Bertha von Suttner en sont une preuve), ce qui amène l'auteur à appeler Alfred Nobel « un homme de paix ». Il énumère ensuite les personnalités les plus en vue qui ont reçu le Prix après Henry Dunant et Frédéric Passy. L'auteur se déclare convaincu, encore aujourd'hui, que l'existence même du Prix Nobel de la Paix valorise l'engagement pour la paix et contribue ainsi à établir un monde sans guerres.*