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Skiing: Nansen and Norwegian Nationalism

The major question addressed in this paper is, how did skiing become so tied to Norwegian nationalism? The answer lies in Fridtjof Nansen's trek across Greenland in 1888, his book about it published two years later, and his attempt to reach the North Pole in the early 1890s. These years coincided with a growing sense and much discussion of what comprised nationalism in Norway. Nansen judged that skiing was an essential aspect: it "is perhaps of far greater national importance than is generally supposed," he wrote. The years were also connected with political upheavals. The first was local: a dispute with Sweden over consular representation. The second was international: the growing tensions with Russia (so close to Scandinavia) and various imperial squabbles.

Nansen's idea of crossing Greenland on skis was unsupported and ridiculed in 1888 as he prepared for his adventure. When he returned home, however, he was received as a reincarnated Viking and national hero. In this newly established position, he was able to launch the "Fram" (his specially constructed ship) with support from the government, scientific societies, and the like in order to try for the North Pole. Although he failed to reach the Pole, left the "Fram" to be brought home when possible, and skied off with a companion, he was acclaimed as the man who had been 'farthest north' and he returned an even greater national hero than before.

In these years Norway's dispute with Sweden became the fulcrum around which most other discontent turned. The break came in 1905, by which time the bourgeois had embraced skiing and inextricably mixed it with a sense of what it was to be Norwegian. Nansen's exploits on skis made this possible. The political fact of separation from Sweden in 1905 was also the result of the lack of political will on the part of the Swedes to keep Norway in their domain. The last thing that the Great Powers wanted was more trouble on their hands; Scandinavia was so close to Russia, already involved in the Russo-Japanese war, and various imperial crises appeared with alarming regularity.

Sources for the paper are contemporary newspapers, journals, and books, including Nansen's own. Indeed, his works had immense influence on many individuals around the world and it was they who went on to create the material foundation of today's sport of skiing: the clubs, organized races, huts, and so on. Paradoxically, this is something of which Nansen did not approve. Unwittingly, through his very successful use of skis, Nansen helped to turn what Norwegians called "ski-idraet" into "skisport."