

1,001 ways to lose a Nobel Prize

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A gold replica of the Nobel medal

It's easier to lose a Nobel Prize than to win one.

Smuggled out to impress girls in a bar, or dissolved to prevent the Nazis from getting their hands on one, the precious gold medals have gone missing in crazy, tragic or spectacular ways over the more than hundred-

year history of the Nobel Prize.

Here are some of them:

Dissolved in acid

When the Nazis invaded Denmark in April 1940, scientists at Niels Bohr's Institute for Theoretical Physics began to worry about the 1914 and 1925 Nobel Physics Prize gold medals that two German laureates—Max von Laue and James Frank—had placed there for safekeeping.

"In Hitler's empire it was almost a capital offence to send gold out of the country, and, Laue's name being engraved into the medal, the discovery of this by the invading forces would have had very serious consequences for him," Hungarian chemist George de Hevesy, who was working at the Institute, wrote in 1962.

After being persuaded not to bury the medals as they could be unearthed, de Hevesy decided to dissolve the two 23-carat-gold discs with aqua regia acid mixture, the only solution able to do so.

Stored high up on a shelf in his laboratory, the orange-coloured liquid went unnoticed by the Nazis.

After the war was over, de Hevesy—who won the Nobel Prize himself in 1943—turned the gold back into a precipitate in 1950. He gave it to the Nobel Foundation so it could be recast into two medals which were presented to the men in 1952.



The 1926 Nobel Peace Prize medal won by Aristide Briand (R) was sold in 2008

for 12,200 euros (\$14,000)

In a less triumphant moment, Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun gave his Nobel Literature Prize medal to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in 1943.

A strong supporter of the Nazis, Hamsun was convicted of treason in 1947 and spent the rest of his life in mental institutions.

It is not known what became of his medal.

Under the Hammer

Sometimes, because of acts of charity, inheritance disputes or just because life can take odd turns, the Nobel medals end up for sale at auctions.

With varying results.

The Nobel Peace Prize won by Frenchman Aristide Briand in 1926 for his role in France and Germany's short-lived post-war reconciliation was sold for the modest sum of just 12,200 euros (\$14,000) in 2008.

Six years later, US scientist James Watson, who won the 1962 award for his co-discovery of the structure of DNA and who has made controversial remarks about Africans, sold his medal for a record \$4.1 million excluding taxes.

A bonanza for the US biologist—especially after the buyer, Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov, returned the medal to him.



Robbers in India stole a replica of Kailash Satyarthi's Nobel Peace Prize medal

Stop, thief

There have also been times when medals have just disappeared.

France's Heritage Museum Ecomusee of Saint-Nazaire only had Aristide Briand's medal in its possession for a few years after buying it so cheaply: it was stolen in 2015 and has yet to be recovered.

And in India in 2017, robbers made off with the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize medal won by Kailash Satyarthi. Or so they thought. The medal was a replica—the real one is on display in a museum—and it was quickly recovered.

No such luck for the 1913 Nobel literature medal awarded to Rabindranath Tagore, whose medal was snatched in 2004 and has not been found.

Confiscated

Iranian lawyer and human rights champion Shirin Ebadi in 2009 accused Tehran of confiscating her assets over unpaid taxes.

A bank deposit box containing her 2003 Nobel Peace Prize medal and her Legion d'Honneur medal were seized to pay \$410,000 in back taxes, she said. Iranian authorities denied the claim.

After an international outcry, Ebadi's Nobel medal was returned to her.



Nobel winners' names are engraved on the back of the medal, except for the peace and economics prizes

Gold War

Nobel laureates' names are engraved on the reverse side of their medal, except for the prizes for Peace and Economics, where the names are written on the edge.

So it's perhaps not so strange to get your gold mixed up: 1975 Nobel Economics Prize co-laureates Leonid Kantorovich of Russia and Tjalling Koopmans of the US returned home with each other's medals, according to the official Nobel website www.nobelprize.org.

Because of the Cold War, it took four years of diplomatic efforts for each medal to be returned to its owner.

Showing off to girls

Panic erupted in December 1999 at a suite in Oslo's Grand Hotel. The Nobel medal, just awarded to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), had disappeared.

The next day, the medal was back where it belonged. Members of the French MSF delegation had borrowed it to impress girls in Oslo's bars.

"You could see the traces of the teeth of everyone who wanted to see if the medal really was made of pure gold," Morten Rostrup, a member of the Norwegian MSF delegation, revealed in a 2006 book.

"But they would have needed more than a Nobel medal to hook up," he told AFP in an email.

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