

How the Nazi years influenced the Nobel Prize in Literature

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Paulus Tiozzo studied the Nobel Prize and German literature for his thesis. Previously inaccessible archival material shows how members of the Swedish Academy viewed German literature during the two World Wars and the influence that Adolf Hitler and Nazism had on the Nobel Prize.

Few prizes give rise to so much emotion, discussion and debate as the Nobel Prize in Literature. Every year, there is great speculation about which author the Swedish Academy might award the Prize to. But anyone who thinks they might be able to identify some pattern or logic behind the process of determining the prize winners won't have an easy task, according to Paulus Tiozzo.

"It all depends on what the members of the Swedish Academy were thinking at a particular time. And it's not just about the candidate's ability as an author, but also personal factors, such as whether a member of the Academy liked or disliked the author for political reasons."

His thesis in the subject area of German is a historical study of the Nobel Prize in Literature and its criteria seen from the perspective of the German authors nominated for the Prize between 1901 and 1971.

So what are the criteria for being nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature? Among other things, Alfred Nobel wrote that the Prize should go to a person who, during the previous year, in the field of [literature](#), produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction. No more detail about what this means is provided.

"So this has been interpreted from the different perspectives of the

members of the Swedish Academy. I argue that you cannot understand the history of the Nobel Prize unless you look at its specific historical context in each instance. Many people have advanced thoughts and opinions on this matter, but I demonstrate more concretely, based empirical evidence, how the authors nominated were assessed."

Ambivalent relationship to Nazism

That he looked at the period up to 1971 was for purely practical reasons. The documents relating to the decision-making process surrounding the Nobel Prize are subject to a strict non-disclosure rule for 50 years, after which the archives are released. The Nobel Library in Stockholm includes nomination letters, statements of opinion, minutes of meetings and correspondence.

The time span chosen, and the fact that he looked at German-speaking literature, mean that a portion of the material deals with how Germany was viewed before and during Nazi rule. For example, the Nobel Committee's chair Per Hallström firmly rejected the first nomination of Hermann Hesse 1931.

"Hallström himself had written propaganda in support of Germany, and thought that Hesse, with his pacifist stance, had behaved contemptuously and lacked pride in his nation."

Those who sat on the Nobel Committee had an especially great influence on the Nobel Prize—the chair of this Committee in particular. Per Hallström had this role for 24 years, from 1922–1946, and compiled several hundred opinions on authors.

"He had an ambivalent relationship with Nazism. He was fascinated by Hitler and the national revolutionary aspects of Nazism appealed to him. But on the other hand, he was very critical of its anti-Semitism."

According to Paulus Tiozzo, the Nobel Committee took a generally cautious approach at this time and tried not to fall into any politically motivated traps.

"If the Prize had been given to an author who had been forced to flee from Nazi Germany for political reasons, there would probably have been some kind of backlash from there, and it was this that the Swedish Academy wanted to avoid. It did not either want to give the Prize to any author who appeared to be officially sanctioned by the Nazis. In general, much thought was given to how the choice of Nobel Laureates might affect the image of the Academy. The same applied to candidates from the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. It is likely that similar political considerations are still weighed into the decision, even though it is difficult to know this with certainty."

New insights into the Nobel Prize as a phenomenon

What surprised him most during his work on the thesis is how German literature was viewed in Sweden during the 20th century, especially by the members of the Academy.

"You get an impression of Sweden being dominated by German literature at the time, but that impression is not correct. Swedish authors and literary scholars were much more critical and nuanced than you might think and were not unreserved admirers of Goethe, Schiller and other German 19th century writers. English and French authors were admired on the other hand. This is one of the reasons why many German Nobel Prize candidates were rejected."

"Hopefully [my thesis] will lead to new insights into the Nobel Prize as a phenomenon and also on the importance of German literature outside Germany. I also hope that it stimulates interest in more research in both literary history and the Nobel Prize," says Tiozzo.

German-speaking authors awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 1901–1971:

- 1902 Theodor Mommsen Germany
- 1908 Rudolf Eucken Germany
- 1910 Paul Heyse Germany
- 1912 Gerhart Hauptmann Germany
- 1919 Carl Spitteler Switzerland
- 1929 Thomas Mann Germany
- 1946 Hermann Hesse Germany/Switzerland
- 1966 Nelly Sachs Germany/Sweden

During the years 1940–1943, no Prize was awarded because of World War II

More information: Thesis abstract: [gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/741... ?locale-attribute=en](https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/741...?locale-attribute=en)

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