

First Discussion Paper (Due Monday, September 23):

Write a five-page (1,500 word) essay on either one of the following two topics.

1. The time is late May, 1916. The end of what is called, in Germany, the “summer” semester (March through June) is rapidly approaching and, with it, the conclusion of your work on a physics degree under Professor Victor Jakob. This means, among other things, that you also have to begin your mandatory military service. But you have a choice. You can choose to take a commission as a lieutenant commanding an infantry unit, probably on the western front, or you can choose an assignment at the Institute of Physical Chemistry in Berlin-Dahlem where, thanks to your training in atmospheric physics, you will be doing research on dispersal patterns in the delivery of poison gas.

Many of your teachers and fellow students are urging you to accept the latter assignment, arguing that it will be a big boost to your career, since Berlin is the center of German science and you will get to know many important people. Your father, a much-decorated veteran of the Franco-Prussian War (1870), very much wants you to take the commission in the infantry. Your mother, herself the daughter of an Evangelical (Lutheran) minister, doesn’t want you risking your life on the front but is also heartsick at the thought of your working on a weapon like poison gas.

What do you decide to do? In your five-page discussion paper, give an argument to justify your conclusion about the proper choice of action. If you wish, write the paper as if you were writing a long letter to your closest confidant (or confidante), say a cousin or a personal friend, the person with whom you’ve long felt most comfortable discussing such difficult personal issues. In other words, this is someone with whom you can be totally honest. (And let’s also assume that your letter won’t be read by the censors, so you don’t have to worry about writing things that might get you in political trouble.)

2. You are Bosley Crowther (a real person), the lead film critic for the *New York Times*. It is December 17, 1959, the day when Stanley Kramer’s highly anticipated film, “On the Beach,” will premiere in New York and seventeen other cities around the world. It falls to you to write the review that will appear the next morning in the *Times*, a review that is sure to receive a lot of attention because of the prominent role that you play in the world of film criticism. You know that this is one of most important reviews that you will ever write. This in part because of the star power in the film, directed by Stanley Kramer and featuring Cary Grant, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire, and Anthony Hopkins. But it is also because this is the first major motion picture to tackle the theme of nuclear war and it is being released at the height of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, when atmospheric nuclear testing by the United States and the Soviet Union was poisoning the planet with tons of highly radioactive fallout and when public fears about the possibility of all-out, global, nuclear war were at a peak, fears stoked by the infamous “duck and cover” bomb drills in schools, regular tests of the nationwide Civil Defense emergency warning network, and the ever more hostile rhetoric coming out of Moscow and Washington, D.C. Write that review.