

First Discussion Paper (Due Tuesday, February 4):

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.)