The end of World War I and the years that followed exerted tremendous pressure on Germany’s community of elite scientists, a pressure that both devastated the individuals and tore the group apart. These tensions provoked many of Germany’s elite scientists and scientific Nobel laureates into deep crises of social position and identity. Only two years after World War I concluded, clear fault-lines—which previously did not exist within the elite German scientific milieu—emerged to separate leading Jewish and far-right scientists. Although the collapse of Germany’s elite scientific community, and the resurgence of Jewish identity among ‘secular’ or converted German Jews, is often seen as a product of the 1930s, I argue that tensions over German defeat and the non-fulfillment of German nationalism in 1918-19 quickly became crucial in transforming elite German scientists’ identities: from “Germans” to “Jews,” from scientists into ‘anti-mathematical’ Nazis, or from defenders of a scientific order to individuals who could passively watch its collapse without striving to protect their former Jewish-German friends and colleagues.
“[Richard] Willstätter remained committed to the German nation in some way until the eve of World War II, when Willstätter, a decidedly anti-religious Jew who was nevertheless proud of his rabbinical ancestors, narrowly escaped Nazi militants into Switzerland. In the preceding two decades, Willstätter’s close friend and former student Arthur Stoll tried desperately to bring and keep Willstätter in Switzerland away from the Nazis, and Chaim Weizmann tried convincing Willstätter to emigrate to Mandate Palestine multiple times—in Munich, Paris, and Zurich—to no avail. Willstätter did travel to Mandate Palestine once, in 1934, taking the place and fulfilling a wish of the late [Fritz] Haber. There, Willstätter reunited with a former student: Julius Kleeberg, a Jewish-German doctor who served in the German military, survived an Entente prisoner of war camp, and emigrated to Jerusalem for hospital work a few years earlier. Kleeberg and Weizmann again urged Willstätter to flee Munich. As Kleeberg recalled, Willstätter replied: “I know that Germany has gone mad, but if a mother falls ill it is not a reason for her sons to leave her... I must return.”

“Willstätter retained a strong sense of obligation and connection to the German nation, firmly resisting all entreaties to leave. But when faced with numerous calls for collective leadership, framed in often-explicitly nationalist language—from the urgings to duty, to the appeals of Munich students, to the offers of prominent national scientific posts in Berlin—Willstätter resisted. That decision was new in his life. He had previously encountered Jew-hating prejudices within the Bavarian monarchy, the German army, and the University of Berlin faculty: none had deterred him or provoked him to sever ties with any institution, as commitment to the nation had always reigned higher. … In the years after the war, the chemist’s relationship with German nationalism had become painfully ambiguous. After his resignation, likely in 1926 or 1927, Willstätter traveled to Oxford and visited his friend, British chemist and future Nobel laureate Robert Robinson. The Nazis would not garner more than 3 percent of German votes until years later in 1930. Nevertheless, Willstätter already mused sadly to Robinson: “Einstein is a German Jew; I am a Jewish German.” That identity, once a source of pride, already in the mid-1920s was a source of unease.”