What is it that incites ordinary men and women to participate in mass killings — and especially to kill their neighbours? In this seminar I will look at the various motivating factors — psychological, social, historical and political — that together constitute the driving force in mass killings. Drawing on extensive research from the Jewish pogrom in Jedwabne, Poland in 1941 and from interviews of killers engaged in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, it is possible to identify a constellation of elements central to the mass killings in these two, different, parts of the world. Against a background of disempowerment and ethnic humiliation, the advent of a power vacuum in both places seems to have opened the door to creating a perverse social norm that effectively provoked and sanctioned mass killing. Evil enters when there is no one keeping watch. With xenophobia, immigration and political instability on the increase throughout the world, do we need to be especially alert to the dangers of hate crimes and violence that could tip over into mass killing?

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