

HONS 400 Confronting Evil in History

Prof. Dan Little EMAIL: delittle@umich.edu Office Location: CASL 3088 Phone Number: 593-5179	Office Hours: Monday 2-3 and by appt (Zoom) Semester and Year: Fall 2021 3.00 credit hour course Course Meeting Times and Format(s): TUES 2:00-4:45 in-person
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Course Description

Evil is sometimes thought to be incomprehensible and abnormal, falling outside of familiar historical and human processes. And yet human history is replete with instances of cruelty on a massive scale, involving systematic torture, murder, and enslavement of ordinary, innocent human beings. The crimes and atrocities of the twentieth century present an enormous problem for all of us as human beings. How should we attempt to know and understand atrocities such as the Holocaust, Stalin's war of starvation against Ukrainian peasants, or the outrages committed by the Japanese army against the civilians of Nanking? Do we have the language necessary to characterize the Holocaust or the human realities of the rape of Nanking? Do we have theories in psychology and sociology that permit us to begin to understand how these atrocities were possible? Can human civilization learn from a truthful recognition of these atrocities? The seminar underlines the importance of careful, truthful historical investigation of the complicated realities of dark periods in our human history; the importance of understanding these events in terms that give attention to the human experience of the people who lived through them and those who perpetrated them; and the possibility of improving our civilization's resilience in the face of the impulses towards cruelty to other human beings that has so often emerged. How should the disciplines of philosophy and history confront these evils? We will attempt to demonstrate the crucial role that honest recognition of ugly truths about our past has for our development as human cultures. And we will consider some of the intellectual and moral ideas that philosophers have contributed to understanding these evils and resisting them in the future.

Required

Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*
Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*
Wendy Lower, *The Ravine*
Dan Little, *Evil in History* (e-book, Canvas)

Recommended (not required)

Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*
John Kekes, *Roots of Evil*
Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*

Teaching modality

This course will be taught in the normal in-person mode, organized around intensive discussion of the materials and issues. I will prepare a weekly video lecture that I expect you to view before each class meeting. I will also ask you to contribute to an ongoing class discussion on Canvas, and there will be weekly “Quick Questions” assignments based on the readings to be completed on Canvas as well. I have taken special effort to find ways of helping you be fully engaged with the course materials and with each other. Each student will be responsible for preparing two in-class presentations throughout the semester.

It is crucial in this course to keep up with all readings and written assignments and to be prepared for lively discussion on Tuesday afternoons. This is a course that involves intellectual stimulation, and – like exercise at the gym – you only get out of it a multiple of what you put into it. The more engaged you are in the readings, videos, and assignments, the more you will learn and expand your understanding of philosophy, history, morality, and our place in time and culture.

I encourage you to think independently and creatively about the topics and texts that we will be discussing. Each person’s perspective is valued, and sometimes our ideas get much better when we see how we agree or disagree with others. All your thoughts are welcome, whether in online discussion, in-class discussion, responses to short questions, or full papers. All I ask is civility in relation to others and reasons for your opinions.

Assignment and Grading Distribution:

Short questions on each assignment 20%

Discussion (including comments on other people’s comments) 15%

In-class presentation 1 10%

In-class presentation 2 10%

Paper 1 (6-8 pages) 20%

Paper 2 (8-10 pages) 25%

In-class presentations

Each week we will have one or two short 15-minute student presentations on a topic related to the week’s readings. The presenter will prepare an organized set of ideas about the topic and help stimulate discussion from students in the course. Each student will participate in two presentations.

Course Outline

Date	Assignments and readings
9/7/21	Introduction to course videos
9/14/21	Learning the truth about atrocity Lower, <i>The Ravine</i> (all)
9/21/21	Genocide and atrocity Snyder, <i>Bloodlands</i> , Preface, Introduction, chapters 1-6
9/28/21	Holocaust and Holodomor Snyder, <i>Bloodlands</i> , chapter 7-11, Conclusion
10/5/21	The historian's responsibility: facing painful truths and expressing them "Andrus Pork, "History, Lying, and Moral Responsibility" "Anna Wylegala, "Managing the difficult past: Ukrainian collective memory and public debates on history" Tony Judt, "The Past is Another Country"
10/12/21	What is evil in history? Kekes, <i>Roots of Evil</i> (excerpts); Neiman, <i>Evil in Modern Thought</i> (excerpts)
10/19/21	The malleability of human nature and the possibility of moral progress; learning from human disaster Hume (excerpts); Rousseau (excerpts); Hobbes (excerpts); Ben Anderson (excerpts); Little, parable
10/26/21	Ordinary perpetrators Browning, <i>Ordinary Men</i>
11/2/21	Ordinary perpetrators Browning, <i>Ordinary Men</i> Jan Gross, <i>Neighbors</i> , selections (PDF) Milgram and Zimbardo social psychology experiments on authority and obedience
11/9/21	Organizational evil Neil Gregor, <i>Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich</i> (chapter VI PDF) Peter Hayes, <i>Industry and Ideology: I. G. Farben in the Nazi Era</i> (selections PDF) Iris Chang, <i>The Rape of Nanking</i> (excerpts)
11/16/21	Racism, anti-Semitism, and dehumanization: genocide, colonialism, war Articles TBA
11/23/21	THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY
11/30/21	Moral resources for resisting evil Glover, <i>Humanity</i> (selections PDF) Nussbaum, <i>Compassion</i> (PDF)
12/7/21	A conception of the moral human being in extremity Nussbaum, <i>Compassion</i> (PDF)
10/29/21	First paper due
12/3/21	Second paper due