Fall River, Massachusetts: Jewish cemetery vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti

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On Sunday afternoon, March 17, police in Fall River responded to a report of vandalism at the Hebrew cemetery on McMahon Street in the southeastern Massachusetts city. The discovery was made by a cemetery maintenance worker. It is believed the vandalism occurred either late Saturday night or early Sunday morning.

Police originally reported that "approximately 25 gravestones" were defaced. But following a row-by-row examination of the cemetery on Tuesday, they announced on Wednesday that 59 gravestones had been defaced with anti-Semitic language and swastikas. Some had also been toppled over.

Gravestones were defaced with black magic marker. In addition to swastikas, anti-Semitic phrases included "Heil Hitler," "Expel the Jews" and "Oy vey! This is MAGA country," a reference to President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again."

According to the Fall River-based *Herald News*, the phrase "The Day of the Rope" was written on at least two gravestones. This appears to refer to a book of fiction about a white nationalist uprising against the United States government.

The anti-Semitic incident in Fall River took place just days after the March 15 fascist terror attack on two Muslim mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which left 50 dead. It also occurred less than six months after the October 27, 2018 mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue that killed 11.

The Fall River attack, while claiming no lives, was inspired by the same white nationalist, fascistic views propounded by the Trump administration and right-wing governments in France, Italy, Brazil and elsewhere. These ideologies are openly promoted to incite violence against immigrants and others.

In the wake of the New Zealand atrocity, President Trump was asked by a reporter whether he saw white nationalism as a "rising threat around the world." He responded. "I don't really. I think it's a small group of people that have very, very serious problems. … If you look at what happened in New Zealand, perhaps that's the case."

The facts tell another story, however. The shooter, Australian citizen Brenton Tarrant, hailed Trump as "a symbol of renewed white identity." His lengthy manifesto called for violence and civil war to force non-European "invaders" from Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand.

Tarrant was in fact part of an international network of far-right organizations and had been radicalized in Europe, including in Britain. In the days following the Christchurch massacre, a number of far-right attacks on Muslims have taken place in the UK, pointing to the example provided by the horrific event in New Zealand to those inspired by white supremacist and Islamophobic views.

In Fall River, the Jewish community has long history. During the 19th century, the city was famous as the leading textile manufacturing center the US. It has always been a city attracting immigrants, many working in the textile mills or providing services supporting the industry.

"Spindle City," as it was known, was second in the world in textile manufacturing only to Manchester, England. Thousands of workers, mainly of Irish and French-Canadian descent, came to Fall River in the 1860s and 1870s to work in the mills. German Jewish settlers came to Fall River beginning in this same period; Russian Jewish immigrants arrived in the 1880s and 1890s.

While World War I provided a general increase in

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demand for textiles, many mills in Fall River subsequently shut down as a result of the Great Depression, and by the mid-20th century the city was no longer a textile center. The city shrank in population from a high of about 120,000 in the 1920s to about 88,930 today.

The Hebrew Cemetery in Fall River is among the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the state, having been established in the late 19th century. Many of the German and Russian Jewish settlers who immigrated to the US in that period are likely buried there.

Fall River is still a city of many ethnicities. About half of residents are Luso-American, having their origins somewhere in the former Portuguese Empire. Recent immigrants include those from Cambodia and India. The Jewish population is now under 1,000, down from about 4,000 in 2008, as people have left to seek other livelihoods.

Friends and family of those interred at the 300-plot cemetery in Fall River came Wednesday to survey the anti-Semitic vandalism and the check on whether the headstone of one of their loved ones had been damaged. The *Herald News* reported on Louis Gitlan, who walked through the graveyard row by row with a list of names, taking an occasional photo of a headstone. Seven of his relatives are buried there.

The *Herald News* wrote: “Gazing at the headstone of a man who died in 1939, he said every person buried in the Hebrew cemetery faced persecution at one time or had family members who did.”

Referring to those who had fled Nazi persecution, he told the newspaper, “What did they go through to get to this place, and finally be free? Then realize that they can’t escape it.” Even in death, they have been slandered by anti-Semitic filth.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, there were 90 anti-Jewish hate crimes reported in Massachusetts in 2017, a nearly 50 percent increase compared to 2016.

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