

Jewish cemetery in Michigan desecrated with Trump campaign slogans on eve of election

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Just prior to President Donald Trump's final campaign rally Monday in Grand Rapids, Michigan it was revealed that several tombstones at a nearby Jewish cemetery had been vandalized with pro-Trump graffiti.

Unknown perpetrators spray-painted red letters spelling out "TRUMP" on a row of tombstones at Ahavas Israel Cemetery, while two other gravesites had "MAGA," an abbreviation for Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," scrawled in red graffiti.

The discovery comes less than a week after FBI raids on the neo-Nazi group The Base, which resulted in the arrest of Justen Watkins and Alfred Gorman. The two fascist leaders ran a "hate camp" in Bad Axe, roughly 200 miles east of Grand Rapids, where they trained with weapons and explosives.

The vandalism was discovered and reported to police by Rabbi David Krishef of the Congregation Ahavas Israel, one of a handful synagogues in the Grand Rapids area. Of the 200,000 people who live in Grand Rapids, roughly 0.5 percent, or 1,000, are Jewish.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of Michigan posted photos of the crime on Twitter on November 2. It is unclear when exactly the vandalism took place. Sergeant John Wittkowski of the Grand Rapids Police Department estimated the attack may have occurred within the last three to five days. Wittkowski was skeptical of discovering the culprits, telling *USA Today* that he did not have any leads and that "we're just crossing our fingers at this point."

A little over a year ago, on October 13, 2019, staff at Temple Emanuel, also located in Grand Rapids, discovered anti-Semitic posters on the synagogue's doors. The posters were attributed to the Vorherrschaft Division, a neo-Nazi group. One of the posters had a photo of Adolf Hitler with the words, "Did you forget

about me?" sprayed across it, while the other read, "A crusade against Semite-led sub-humans."

At the time of the incident, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the Grand Rapids police were "familiar with the posters and have seen them before, but didn't share where." Speaking to CNN two days after the incident, Wittkowski stated that no arrests had been made and the department had no leads.

There is no question that fascists and anti-Semites are festering in police departments across the US and internationally. After a student newspaper, the *Manual RedEye*, on October 30 uncovered Kentucky State Police training material that featured quotes from Hitler in a slideshow, it was announced that State Police Commissioner Rodney Brewer would be resigning on November 4. Brewer had been assigned to the post by Democratic Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear and was commissioner while the presentation was in use at the training academy.

Carolyn Normandin, the ADL's Michigan regional director, speaking to the *Washington Post* regarding the cemetery defacement, said that while the "disgusting and vile" vandalism was still under investigation, she would not label it an act of anti-Semitism until more information was revealed.

Rabbi Krishef agreed with Normandin, writing in a statement to *USA Today*: "It may just have been opportunistic vandalism against a cemetery which is isolated and hard to see from the road, on Halloween weekend, not an attack against the Jewish community. We don't know."

In the run-up to the US election and throughout his presidency, Trump has encouraged and fostered anti-Semitic, fascist and racist elements not only in the state apparatus, but in the broader society, as part of his strategy to remain in power. This was sharply

expressed in his infamous declaration that there were “very fine people” among the neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, chanting “blood and soil” and “Jews will not replace us.” This was followed the next day by a murderous vehicle assault by white supremacist James Alex Fields, which injured several anti-fascist protesters and killed 32-year-old activist Heather Heyer.

In subsequent rallies held throughout his presidency, Trump has continued to rail against “globalists,” a well known anti-Semitic trope. More recently he has taken to defending 14 militia members arrested for plotting to kidnap and kill Michigan’s Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer.

Trump’s words have had their intended effect. In the US, the ADL released a study earlier this year that recorded a total of 2,107 anti-Semitic incidents across the US in 2019, which it noted was “a 12 percent increase from the incidents recorded in 2018.” In 2019, ADL recorded 1,127 incidents of harassment, 919 vandalism incidents and 61 assaults.

Every category increased from the year prior. The largest percentage jump was in the assault category, a 56 percent increase over 2018, resulting in 95 victims, including five fatalities.

“Make no mistake, this heinous act was committed on the eve of the 2020 election to send an intimidating message to the president’s opponents, and particularly Jewish voters,” read a statement issued by the Michigan Jewish Democrats following the incident. Noah Arbit, funder and chair of the Michigan Democratic Jewish Caucus, added: “Time and again, the president of the United States has sided with anti-Semites, white supremacists, racists and bigots of all kinds.”

Following the attack last Friday by a pro-Trump caravan on a Biden campaign bus in Texas, the state Republican Party chairman, Allen West, a former military officer and Florida congressman, concluded a statement dismissing the attack with an anti-Semitic slur: “Maybe Soros [the billionaire Jewish financier] can cut y’all another check in 2022.”

While Trump has certainly stoked anti-Semitic sentiments, he is just the most vile expression of a global process, one that would not end with the election of Joe Biden. In a December 2018 European Union survey, the ADL found that “80 percent of European

Jews feel that anti-Semitism in their country has increased over the past five years, and 40 percent live in daily fear of being physically attacked.”

In Germany, world renowned Russian-German pianist Igor Levit has courageously stood firm against not only death threats, facilitated by the state promotion of the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, but also anti-Semitic slurs from the press.

Far-right forces in Germany are also believed to have been behind a devastating vandalism operation on October 4 that affected 63 priceless artifacts at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Pergamon and Neues Museum in Berlin.



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