

# WHAT DO ANTI-SEMITISM AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT HATE HAVE IN COMMON?

Plenty.

BY JOYCE DUBENSKY

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Photo by Getty Images / Mourner after the killings at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh

AMID THE NOISE of our news cycles, there are the occasional stories that become part of our personal journeys. Sometimes, we only need a word or phrase to bring them back with full force, like “the Holocaust” or “9/11.” Sometimes, it’s just the name of a city. Pittsburgh. El Paso.

For me, Pittsburgh now conjures up images of a deliberate slaughter of Jews in their synagogue because of their religion—which is also my religion. According to their attacker, it was also because they supported the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which resettles refugees, including people from Africa, Eurasia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Similarly, El Paso reminds me of my grandmother. She was an immigrant who escaped her Jewish village after her left arm was badly burned—and forever scarred—during a Cossack attack. In El Paso, Hispanic immigrants were also deliberate targets, as another mass murderer went to Walmart.



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Each of these tragic events is personal for me, and each is horrifying in its own right. But they are not isolated phenomena. The anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant sentiments on which they were built are intertwined.

Both reflect long-standing tribalism rooted in hate, and both are being exacerbated by rapid societal change, globalization, and emerging transnational networks proliferating white supremacist ideologies. These realities give us Pittsburgh, El Paso, Jersey City, Poway, and countless other mass murders—while exponentially metastasizing hate, the dehumanization of “others,” and violence.

## Intertwined xenophobia

ANTI-SEMITISM AND XENOPHOBIA have existed throughout history and, most certainly, throughout the American experience. Grounded in dehumanizing stereotypes and malicious conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism operated alongside xenophobic mindsets that forced Jews into ghettos or sought to push them out of communities altogether, as the unwelcome stranger.

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TWEET THIS

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Similarly, immigrants to the U.S. and migrants worldwide have repeatedly been othered and ostracized, often prevented from freely following their faiths and being viewed as *lesser than* those in so-called civilized society. Consider the Irish who emigrated during the potato famine. As immigrant Catholics they faced violence and the emergence of anti-immigrant groups dedicated to “returning” the country to their homogeneous vision of the U.S.—such as the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, which was committed to preserving a Protestant America. In a similar way that Jews have historically been labeled, the Irish were stereotyped as undesirable and dangerous. Today, we hear the same drumbeat, this time toward Muslims and other groups seeking to emigrate across borders, people who are called invaders and terrorists.

Though anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant fervor are not new, they are again surging with renewed force. Currently, Jews make up 2 percent of the U.S. population but are the targets of more than 50 percent of reported religiously motivated hate crimes. Likewise, immigrants are frequent victims of violent hate crimes including assault and robbery, though we do not fully know the breadth of this phenomenon. As this community is increasingly targeted, they’re also becoming more frightened of reporting incidents to law enforcement for fear of consequences to their immigration status.

Deeply rooted and sometimes intertwined, anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiments are now converging. Both Jews and immigrants are frequently stereotyped as sub-human and somehow alien. They are also racialized. White supremacists demonize Jews as racially distinct and are fixated on the skin color of foreign-born people in the U.S., the majority of whom come from Asia and South America.

## The Big Lie and social media

GLOBALIZATION IS RAPIDLY increasing our interconnectivity. The results include exponentially expanding hate groups, bigotry, and violence.

Thanks to air travel and advancements in technology, humans interact and communicate with an immediacy never possible before. As we increasingly connect beyond our home communities, and as escalating migration worldwide creates demographic shifts—with nearly 1 person in every 30 now living outside their native-born country—we encounter more and more people who are different from us. These revolutionary changes enhance lives, but they also facilitate the spread of stereotypes rooted in fear, such as blaming societal ills on Jews and immigrants.

These attitudes are propagated through social media and the technological savvy of white supremacists and others from the so-called alt-right, who use modern communications tactics to transmit their worldviews. One such tactic is to repackage core messages to sound “rational” for mainstream platforms (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook), so they get repeated and are internalized, even by people who do not identify with white supremacy. Some white supremacist messages are disguised as inside “jokes” and are designed to desensitize readers (including vulnerable children, teens, and young adults) to “othering,” stereotypes, and twisted ethical norms. They also tailor their campaigns to match the grievances of different communities and become trusted voices.

These modern tactics are updating a propaganda technique articulated by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, when he charged Jews with using the Big Lie—a lie so big that no one would believe it could be anything but the truth. Hitler then employed that very tactic. After blaming the Jews for abusively using a Big Lie by claiming to be a religion, he then attacked Jews as a race to be feared and mistrusted.

Our understanding of the Big Lie has grown since *Mein Kampf* was published in 1925. It is often used in the context of a full-blown campaign that includes an element of truth or reflects on a fear with which the listener identifies. It is then promulgated by frequent repetition. The result is that it comes to be believed and to be viewed not only as reality but also as the truth.

These days, white supremacist messages, coupled with the proliferation of fake news, deliberate disinformation campaigns—including by governments—and the groundswell of social media, are having significant and damaging impact. “Truth” is now considered

relative. And the Big Lies of the white supremacists are being repeated often enough to take hold.

Compelling research suggests that these strategies and efforts to mainstream anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and “otherizing” tropes can lay a groundwork for outright violence. A joint study by Princeton University and the University of Warwick in the U.K. identified a correlation between President Trump’s negative tweets about Muslims, an increase in anti-Muslim public commentary, and a rise in hate crimes attacking members of that community. In addition, between 2012 and 2019, 1.5 million tweets in English, French, and German parroted the cry, “You [Jews] will not replace us.” It is difficult to imagine that this is unrelated to the violent 2017 white supremacist events in Charlottesville, when supremacists marched through the city’s streets carrying torches and chanting menacingly, “Jews will not replace us.”

Such communications can have a powerful push-pull effect. With the mainstreaming of “othering” heightened by social media, more and more people are feeling alienated, ostracized, and alone. Though most of these individuals will not be drawn into white supremacy or extremist ideologies, some are pushed toward it. Feeling vulnerable and isolated, they become more susceptible to the pull from extremist groups that promise a new home, a community of like-minded friends, and a place where their anger has an outlet.

## A network of mass murder

ACROSS THE GLOBE, there are growing extremist movements built on the conviction that people identified as white are superior and, because of demographic changes and a conspiracy to eliminate the whites, they are at risk. This energizes fear of the other, defined by their contrast to whiteness.

These fears go back centuries. With the emergence of the slave trade came attempts to provide a societal justification for the trade. It was argued that black people and others perceived to be people of color were “lesser” than those who are white. Over time, these convictions have been remodeled into ideological doctrines protecting whiteness and often identifying brown immigrants, Jews, and others as a threat.

One such ideology is now called the “Great Replacement” theory. From its French beginnings, the ideology has roots across Europe. Its premise is that superior white Europeans are being overrun by nonwhites, including Muslims, who are supplanting white Christian populations. Some of the theory’s proponents correlate it with another frightening thesis, that Jews are master conspirators who have a plan for worldwide domination and are doing so by racial mixing that will leave a uniform and racially ambiguous society.

A related ideology evolved in the U.S. and is now known as the “White Genocide” theory. The phrase has become shorthand for white supremacists who are spreading fear of nonwhites (often immigrants and migrants) based on the conviction that these nonwhites threaten to start a war that will result in the genocide of “white civilization.” The theory also perpetrates stereotypes by blaming “shadowy groups” or the “New World Order” (well-known coded frameworks used to describe Jews) for creating this plot. White nationalists such as Richard Spencer envision a white ethno-state as a haven for white supremacists and those who sympathize with their concerns.

With the proliferation of online far-right radicalism, these conspiracy theories are communicated and reinforced as a cohesive message of fear and hate. Disseminated by extremist networks from Europe to the U.S. to New Zealand, individuals adhering to these theories have become mass murderers, inspiring one another and leaving devastation in their wake.

The El Paso shooter left a manifesto that reflects the power of this messaging and mass murder modeling. He opened by describing his attack as “a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” and then justified the murders as “simply defending [his] country from the cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion.” The El Paso shooter is not alone in looking for inspiration to other mass murderers. The Christchurch attacker in New Zealand who slaughtered Muslims at prayer cited white extremist attacks and terrorism in Norway, the U.S., Italy, Sweden, and the U.K.

In much the same manner, the Pittsburgh attacker recited white supremacist mantras targeting Jews but also expressing venom toward immigrants they sought to help. He wrote, “Open your eyes! It’s the filthy EVIL jews Bringing the Filthy EVIL Muslims into the Country!” Similar to the Pittsburgh attacker, a shooter from Germany who attacked a synagogue on Yom Kippur wrote, “If I fail and die, but kill a single Jew, it was worth it. After all, if every White Man kills just one, we win.”

## Finding a way out

GROWING WHITE SUPREMACY worldviews are a threat. They fuel the fires of hate against Jews like me and immigrants like my grandmother. Their impact is personal and real, and it includes terrifying division and violence that extends far beyond these two identities—threatening far too many.

This reality is terrifying enough to immobilize us, but many people across the nation are paying attention. They are taking action and not remaining silent or becoming numbed by the onslaught of Big Lies.

Think of the interfaith activists who showed up at the southern border to condemn the dehumanizing treatment of immigrants and the assault on American morality. Or the thousands of Jews protesting ICE in the Never Again Action effort to stop authoritarian incarceration of immigrants.

People with such strong commitments to justice stand as an example for all of us. My personal inspiration and hope also comes from my unlikely friendships with two men who were once white supremacist activists. Arno Michaelis was a leader of the movement in Wisconsin. And TM Garret was a neo-Nazi in Germany.

Today, both are “formers” and have turned their backs on the movement they once served. Neither is still a hater, and both are living proof that white supremacy does not have to be a terminal. As part of Garret’s journey out of hate, he wanted to attend Yom Kippur services with Jews last year. As he tells it, when he arrived, “they made me feel like family ... me with my past, with my background, praying in Hebrew and asking God for forgiveness ... it felt so good.”

Both Michaelis and Garret prove it is possible to find a way out. Equally moving, they are now committed to helping extremists find their paths out.

This is a moment for clarity, a moral compass guided by a vision of radical respect and inclusion. These men are role models showing a way forward. Now it is up to each of us to stand with them and to lead in our own right.

*Tanenbaum staff member Dasha Tanner contributed research.*



### **Joyce Dubensky**

Joyce Dubensky is CEO of the Tannenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, a nonprofit that works to combat religious bigotry and hate and to bridge differences.

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