

Mounting anti-Semitic attacks in US draw half-hearted response from Trump

By Niles Niemuth
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Some 200 headstones at a Jewish cemetery in University City, Missouri, in the suburbs of St. Louis, were damaged or overturned by vandals late Sunday or early Monday, in the most serious in a wave of anti-Semitic threats and actions this year.

Ultra-right and anti-Semitic forces have been encouraged by the inauguration of Donald Trump, and particularly his elevation of Stephen Bannon, the former CEO of Breitbart News, to a top position at the White House. Breitbart has been a leading promoter of the alt-right, the online designation of the rancid milieu of white supremacists, anti-Semites and neo-Nazis.

No arrests have been made in the Missouri incident, and investigators have not yet formally determined that the attack was a hate crime rather than simple vandalism. But Karen Aroesty, St. Louis regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, told the press the Jewish community was alarmed. “Anxiety is high,” she said. “Your loved ones are there. Your memories are there.”

Both the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Missouri chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations denounced the vandalism. ISNA President Azhar Azeez released a statement saying, “We encourage our members to reach out to their local synagogue and Jewish neighbors to express their solidarity and support and to generously support the rebuilding of the recently desecrated cemetery.”

The FBI has opened an investigation into a series of bomb threats that have targeted several dozen Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) across the United States since the beginning of the year. Eleven centers were threatened via telephone on Monday including in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin; St. Paul, Minnesota; Houston, Texas; Buffalo, New York; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Birmingham, Alabama

So far, all of the threats at the facilities, which provide recreational, cultural and child care services to Jews and non-Jews alike, have turned out to be hoaxes. It is still unknown who is responsible for calling in the threats.

This week’s incidents followed phoned-in bomb threats on January 9, 18 and 31. So far this year, there have been 68 bomb threats at 53 JCCs in 26 states and at one center in Canada.

Paul Goldenberg, the director of the Secure Community Network, an agency that provides security services to Jewish institutions in North America, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that it appeared to be the same caller as in the previous threats.

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency released a recording at the end of last month of one of the threats that was made on January 18. In the recording, the caller chillingly threatens that a bomb is about to go off, killing a significant number of Jews.

“It’s a C-4 bomb with a lot of shrapnel, surrounded by a bag,” an electronically modulated voice states. “In a short time, a large number of Jews are going to be slaughtered. Their heads are going to be blown off from the shrapnel. There’s a lot of shrapnel. There’s going to be a bloodbath that’s going to take place in a short time. I think I told you enough. I must go.”

JCCs in the US have been targeted for attacks in recent years by anti-Semitic white supremacists.

In 1999, Buford O. Furrow, Jr., a member of the neo-Nazi Aryan Nations, injured three children, a teenage counselor and one staff member when he shot up the lobby of the North Valley JCC in the Los Angeles suburb of Granada Hills.

Neo-Nazi Frazier Glenn Miller killed three people and wounded two others in 2014 when he opened fire in the parking lot of the Kansas City JCC in the suburb

of Overland Park.

The Trump administration has come under increasing pressure to respond to the wave of threats. Karen Aroesty of the Anti-Defamation League in St. Louis posed the question after the cemetery vandalism. “What is the government’s position relative to rising anti-Semitism and intolerance generally, and what will the government do to put a stop to it?” she said. “We’ve been asking that for several weeks now.”

After several weeks of silence from the White House about the bomb threats, Trump shut down two Jewish journalists at his news conference last Thursday when they tried to raise the question of the bomb threats and increasing incidents of anti-Semitic threats following his election.

“Some of that anger is caused by people on the other side,” Trump remarked to one of the reporters. “It will be by people on the other side to anger people like you.”

Finally on Tuesday, during a visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture on Tuesday morning, Trump gave an interview to MSNBC in which he made obviously rehearsed remarks—but still poorly delivered and without genuine feeling—denouncing the recent anti-Semitic threats.

“The anti-Semitic threats targeting our Jewish community and community centers are horrible and are painful and a very sad reminder of the work that still must be done to root out hate and prejudice and evil,” Trump stated blithely.

Soon after Trump spoke, Stephen Goldstein, the executive director of the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect, released a statement denouncing the president’s remarks as a “Band-Aid on the cancer of Anti-Semitism that has infected his own Administration.”

“His statement today is a pathetic asterisk of condescension after weeks in which he and his staff have committed grotesque acts and omissions reflecting Anti-Semitism, yet day after day have refused to apologize and correct the public record,” Goldstein added. “Make no mistake: The Anti-Semitism coming out of this Administration is the worst we have ever seen from any Administration.”

Goldstein was referencing the White House’s official commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day last month in which it deliberately omitted any mention of

Jews or anti-Semitism and instead lamented the “innocent people” killed by the Nazis during World War II. This move was seen as clear nod to the neo-Nazi alt.right, which seeks to empty the Holocaust of its significance and instead transform it into a general tragedy in which many people died.

Later in the day Tuesday, at a regular press conference, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked about the threats against Jewish community centers and skepticism over Trump’s latest remarks. He characterized Trump’s remarks Tuesday morning as “unbelievably forceful.” He was half right.

Responding specifically to the statement from the Anne Frank Center, Spicer complained, “It’s ironic that no matter how many times he talks about this, it’s never good enough.”

Despite being given the opportunity, none of the journalists in the briefing room raised the fact that Trump has staffed his White House with rabid anti-Semites, most notably Trump’s senior adviser and “chief strategist” Bannon, the former CEO of the far-right Breitbart News.

Bannon has brought with him a number of other White House staffers from Breitbart, a hotbed of white nationalism and anti-Semitism. People who were in daily contact with neo-Nazis six months ago are now in daily contact with the president of the United States.

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