

THE HISTORY OF WHITE SUPREMACIST GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

White supremacist ideas have harmed individuals and communities in the United States for centuries.

The issue of white supremacy and white nationalism is deeply rooted in the belief that White Christians are superior to other people, and therefore the United States should be a nation just for them. These groups believe that their race must stay “pure.” In addition, their ideology actively fights a wide range of people who are different from them, including Muslims, immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and Jews, to name a few. With respect to Jews, though, the ideology is even more extreme. White supremacists see Jewish people as powerful elites who control the world and help the other groups mentioned above gain power. The theory is that these groups would not be able to gain power themselves, because they are too inferior to do so; as such, Jews must be helping them behind the scenes.

The myth that Jewish people are “puppeteers” and “masterminds,” a lie that is based on conspiracy theories, is also present in anti-Israel and anti-Zionist rhetoric that has been a potent antisemitic trope for hundreds of years. This phenomenon is called “punching up.” “Punching up” is distinguished from “punching down,” which is the view that racists have of the groups they hate, who are seen by them as being somehow lower or lesser than White Christians. According to the “punching up” phenomenon, however, Jews are viewed simultaneously as inferior and an “all-powerful” enemy and therefore dangerous. Because this ideology views Jews as dangerous, rhetoric and violence against Jews is not only excused or justified, but often encouraged as “speaking truth to power.”

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has highlighted the alarming reality that white supremacists have been responsible for more deaths in recent years than any other type of domestic extremist group, underscoring the lethal consequences of these hate-fueled ideologies. The entanglement of supremacist ideologies with antisemitism and the targeting of diverse communities highlight the broad scope of bigotry that these movements perpetuate. There is a spectrum of movements that fall under the white supremacist banner. These include the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, racist skinhead, and Christian Identity groups. All of these groups represent a multifaceted threat that manifests in both physical violence and the spread of online hate.

HOW DOES ANTISEMITISM FIT IN?

Antisemitism is a fundamental pillar of white supremacist ideology. Jewish people are seen as the masterminds behind an alleged global conspiracy aimed at the subjugation or eradication of the “white race.” This demonization of Jews as orchestrating global control is a powerful conspiracy theory. It feeds into the broader white supremacist narrative that views any challenge to white social and political dominance as a threat, and justifies violence and terror to counter any such challenge.

HOW DOES RACE FACTOR INTO THIS IDEOLOGY?

White supremacists have a narrow view of who is considered “white.” In the U.S., this usually means people with European roots who are not Jewish. Some use old racial categories from the 1800s to decide this.

Their ideas about race come from outdated and discredited beliefs and the same racial pseudoscience popular in the 1930s that people can be sorted into races based on their biology or how they look. They think of race as a ladder with different groups ranked from top to bottom. This theory was a cornerstone of Nazi racial ideology and was popular in the Jim Crow South in the United States.

Ironically, Jewish people are often perceived as white. However, within the twisted logic of white supremacy, Jews threaten the purity and dominance of the “white race.”



The Daily Stormer is a far-right, neo-Nazi website consisting of outlandish articles, conspiracy theories, and message boards that frequently peddle in antisemitic myths and white supremacist propaganda.

HOW DID WHITE SUPREMACY EVOLVE IN THE UNITED STATES?

The history and evolution of white supremacy in America, from its foundational contradictions to contemporary manifestations, illustrate a nation still wrestling with its ideals versus the reality of racial and ethnic divisions. The entanglement of supremacist ideologies with antisemitism and the targeting of diverse communities highlight the broad scope of bigotry that these movements perpetuate.

- The Ku Klux Klan (Klan) originated in the aftermath of the Civil War amidst the ruins of the Confederacy, with the intention of re-establishing white dominance under the guise of restoring law and order. This first iteration diminished by the late 19th century but experienced a revival in 1915, spurred by the film “The Birth of a Nation.” This propaganda film has been called “the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history,” depicting black characters as subhuman and sexually aggressive while the Klan characters are the heroes that preserve American values. The film was shown at the White House on February 18, 1915, by then President Woodrow Wilson.

- Following the ruling and subsequent implementation of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that mandated the integration of schools that had previously been segregated by color, America saw a strong push for clear racial desegregation. This led to what is known as the “massive resistance” era, where local governments shut down schools in order to prevent desegregation. This period was a junction where traditional Klan and pro-Confederate symbols merged with a more polished form of racism focused on property rights, school zones, and the intricacies of city politics.
- The long history of white supremacy, highlighted by the Unite the Right Rally by white supremacists in Charlottesville that led to the murder of Heather Heyer, showcases deep-rooted prejudices intertwined with various forms of bigotry. The Klan’s historic animosity towards Jews, Catholics, and African Americans laid the early foundations. This has been compounded by a persistent strain of antisemitism, further amplified by neo-Nazi groups drawing from ideologies abroad.



White supremacists carry Confederate and Nazi flags during the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, 2017, Sipa via AP Images.

Sources

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