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President Obama's Visit to Germany: Mythologies of Dresden Must Be Rejected

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On June 5, President Obama will visit the German city of Dresden. This visit will be intensely controversial. Dresden is most famous for the Anglo-American bombing raid against it on February 13, 1945. The Dresden raid did cause serious loss of life, but in the Second World War it was not unprecedented or unusual. The myths that have grown up about the raid were fostered by the Nazis and spread by post-war Soviet propaganda.

Because of this spurious symbolism, President Obama's decision to visit Dresden is ill-advised. During his visit, the President must absolutely reject any equation of the Western Allies and the Nazis. He must avoid accepting as true the claims of the Nazi and Soviet propagandists about the Dresden raid. Finally, he must stoutly defend the Anglo-American air campaign, which served vital military purposes and which led to the liberation of Western Europe from the Nazis in 1945, and, ultimately, of Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union in 1989.

The Raid on Dresden. On February 13, 1945, 1,100 British and American bombers attacked the city of Dresden, which lies south of Berlin. The bombers dropped a mix of high explosives and incendiary bombs, which created a firestorm that destroyed the center of the city. The number of casualties will never be known, but at the time Nazi authorities privately estimated that 25,000 people lost their lives. A 2004 study of the raid by British historian Frederick Taylor sets the toll at between 25,000 and 40,000 killed,¹ while in 2008 an authoritative commission of German historians esti-

ated the likely toll at 18,000 and definitely no more than 25,000.²

The attack on Dresden was not unusual. In July 1943, a British raid on Hamburg created a similar firestorm that destroyed 56 percent of the city's dwellings and killed 40,000 people.³ Both attacks were part of the Anglo-American strategic bombing campaign that was launched after U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. That campaign followed the German bombing of Warsaw in September 1939 and Rotterdam in May 1940, the Nazi *blitz* against London in the summer and fall of 1940, the German destruction of Belgrade from the air in April 1941, and the British bombing campaign against Germany that began in May 1940 and intensified in 1942.

The raid on Dresden was made at the request of the Soviet Union, which wanted the city's railway junction destroyed to prevent the Germans from concentrating forces against advancing Soviet armies.⁴ Dresden also contained over a hundred factories engaged in war-related work. As Taylor sums up, "Dresden was ranked high among the Reich's wartime industrial centers." This work

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included firms that made parts for torpedoes and machine guns.⁵ Though Dresden was known as a cultural center, it was not, as later myth had it, a city of no military importance.

The Myths Surrounding Dresden. The Nazi regime, frustrated by its inability to stop the Anglo–American attacks, countered by waging a propaganda campaign against them. After the raid on Dresden, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, instead of downplaying it, decided to exaggerate the attack. He leaked falsified documents to the press that multiplied German casualties in the attack by 10: 25,000 became 250,000. He also played on Dresden’s reputation by claiming that it was a city of cultural and artistic treasures only, not a center of war work.⁶

Goebbels’s lies were widely accepted. As Taylor concludes, “The extent of the wide, long-lasting ripple of international outrage that followed the Dresden bombing represents, at least in part, Goebbels’s final, dark masterpiece.”⁷

After the war, Dresden was part of the Soviet zone of occupation and, later, East Germany. The Soviet and East German authorities used the Nazi myth of Dresden as part of their Cold War propaganda campaign against the U.S., Britain, and West Germany. By 1953, mass meetings in East Germany were being told that former Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower—by then, President of the United States—was personally responsible for the attack of the “Anglo–American Air Gangsters,” a term invented by Goebbels. In 1954, the death toll for the raid was officially set by the Communist regime at “hundreds of thousands.”⁸

This Nazi-inspired falsehood was widely accepted. It was repeated in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which was informed by David Irving’s *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963). In a 2000 libel trial in Britain, Irving was described by the judge as an “active Holocaust denier” who “for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence.”⁹ Irving’s treatment of the Dresden raid marked the beginning of an ideological assault on the morality of the war and of the Western Allies.

The Achievements of the Air Campaign. In reality, the raid on Dresden was part of the broader Anglo–American strategic bombing campaign. This campaign achieved five vital objectives that were central to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

First, from 1940 through 1942, it demonstrated that Britain retained the will to fight back. This was vital for British relations with the U.S. and, after June 1941, with the U.S.S.R.

Second, as eminent historian Richard J. Evans argues, the campaign “did even more than the defeats at Stalingrad and in North Africa to spread popular disillusion about the Nazi Party.”¹⁰

Third, the campaign did immense damage to German war production: The Germans calculated in January 1945 that bombing had reduced their tank production by 25 percent.¹¹

Fourth, the campaign compelled Germany to expend substantial resources on an air defense system, resources that could have been devoted to fighting the Western and Soviet armies. It also led

1. Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 443–48.
2. Frederick Taylor, “How Many Died in the Bombing of Dresden?” *Spiegel Online*, October 2, 2008, at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,581992,00.html> (May 27, 2009).
3. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), p. 446.
4. Taylor, *Dresden*, pp. 190–191.
5. See Taylor, *Dresden*, ch. 13, and in particular p. 148.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 370–371.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 392–393.
9. “The Ruling Against David Irving,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2000, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/irving/article/0,,181049,00.html> (May 27, 2009).
10. Evans, *Third Reich*, p. 463.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

Hitler to emphasize the development of the V-1 and V-2 rockets. Both were amazing technological achievements but military irrelevancies that consumed scarce resources.

Finally, the air campaign drew the German *Luftwaffe* away from the Eastern Front—so aiding the Soviet advance—and ultimately destroyed it in the West. Without this air superiority, the D-Day landings would not have been possible. It was those landings that liberated Western Europe from the Nazis and created a base of freedom that led to the collapse of Communist Eastern Europe in 1989. The air campaign did not win the war on its own, but its contributions were immense, and they did not end in 1945.

The Symbolism of Dresden and of Obama's Visit. But for many critics, the Dresden raid has come to symbolize the wrongs of the entire Anglo-American air war against Nazi Germany. For these critics, who are as strong on the far left as on the far right, the attack on Dresden was only the most egregious example of the Anglo-American conduct of that campaign, which they allege constituted a war crime.

The city of Dresden, thus, is the focal point of an effort to establish a degree of moral equivalence between the Western Allies and Nazi Germany and, more broadly, to discredit and criminalize U.S. and British foreign policy when—as in 2003 in the Iraq War—it moves in a direction the critics dislike.

This effort began with the Communist propaganda after 1945. As long as the Cold War lasted, it made little headway, but with the fall of the U.S.S.R. and the reunification of Germany, it grew in popularity. By 2002, with the publication of Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand*, which subtly equates the air war on Germany with the Holocaust, the campaign had reached best-seller status.

The symbolism of Dresden, even if it is poorly grounded in the facts of history, is a reality: It stands in mythology for the supposed war crimes committed by the Americans and the British in their war against the Nazis and, by implication, for their sup-

posed offenses since 1945. By choosing to visit Dresden, of all Germany's cities, President Obama will have this myth as his backdrop. He would have been better advised to avoid Dresden.

Obama's decision to visit the city raises the concern that he will use the opportunity to apologize for the Dresden raid. As that raid has come to symbolize the supposed evils of the entire air war, an apology for Dresden would have far reaching implications about the morality of the Second World War itself. It is particularly unfortunate that Obama will visit Dresden and the Buchenwald concentration camp on the same day. The fact that both the camp and Dresden have been deemed worthy of a presidential visit could be taken to imply the moral equivalence between them that revisionists like Friedrich have sought to create.

What Obama Must Do. The President must not fall for the Nazi- or Communist-inspired myths about Dresden, such as the number of people killed in the raid or the importance of the war-related work being done in the city.

He must also avoid giving any credence whatsoever to efforts to equate the Western Allies and the Nazis, or the air war and the Holocaust. Indeed, he should counter the unfortunate scheduling of his visit to the Buchenwald camp by making an explicit statement that Dresden was part of the broader Anglo-American air campaign against the Nazi regime and that this campaign was vital to the defeat of the Nazis and the victory of the West in 1945.

Finally, he should make the broader point that the lesson of the Second World War is not that there should never again be a war nor that pacifism is a moral choice. The lessons of that war are that evil is a reality, that appeasement is not a virtue, and that no war—even in pursuit of just ends like the defeat of Nazi Germany—can be won without difficult but necessary choices.

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