

(Strategic Culture Foundation)



The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall is over. Tens of high-ranking foreign visitors, many of whom had nothing to do with the historical development at the time it took place, spoke about the enormous importance of the German unification and the symbolic significance of the event which put the final dot in the history of the Cold War. The truth, however, is that there are parts of Europe where the fall of the Berlin Wall is not regarded as a totally positive change since immediately upon the alleged completion of the bloodless Cold War Europe had to face a proliferation of real armed conflicts.

The widely held view is that the 1989 German unification opened the era of the demise of totalitarian regimes across the continent and ultimately made the creation of the united Europe possible. Numerous private conversations with the residents of the Balkans actually led me to a different conclusion. The disintegration of Yugoslavia — a process that cost thousands of lives — commenced only a year after the demolition of the Berlin Wall, notably, the unified and extremely powerful Germany was one of its drivers. Germany was behind the urgent declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia, as well as behind their snap recognition by the international community regardless of the fact that the latter clearly lacked a viable model of coexistence of its Serbian and Croatian populations. Besides, the origin of the ethnic conflict that erupted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the spring of 1992 can only be grasped if the activity of outside forces is taken into account.

Why did Germany, a country just rebuilt after the traumatic partition imposed on it after World War II, take the active role in the Balkan geopolitical overhaul? Napoleon used to say that every nation's politics stems from its geography. The concept applies perfectly to the late 1980ies — early 1990ies situation in Europe on the whole and at the Balkans in particular.

It should be realized that following the collapse of the eastern bloc and the unification of the two Germanies Berlin saw itself as the strongest player in Europe and actively sought European leadership over which it traditionally competed with France. US military bases that Germany continued to host in the framework of its international obligations after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces presented the main obstacle in the way of the country's aspirations. There were indications that Germany hoped to have the problem resolved by shifting the bases to the Balkans, where their existence could be based not on Soviet-era international agreements but

on a NATO mandate, and where Germany could be guaranteed a place among the key players. What it needed to make the plan materialize was a serious pretext for the Balkan expansion, and the process including the break-up of Yugoslavia and the emergence of several protracted ethnic conflicts spread over its former territory conveniently provided one. The implementation of the scenario began in Slovenia and Croatia, where, due to historic reasons, the German influence was deeply rooted. Already in the 1980ies the German intelligence service had strong positions in Slovenia and especially in Croatia as various émigré nationalist and extremist groups it sponsored gradually made inroads into the administrations. German advisers and NGO envoys flocked to Croatia in numbers in 1989-1990. It was due to their activity that eventually the republic became the scene of the first armed clashes in the former Yugoslavia, which scared even the no less active US representatives.

In May, 1990 Croatia's First President Franjo Tudman introduced a new constitution (put together largely under German advisers' supervision) via the parliament dominated by pro-independence forces. It proclaimed that Croatia was a national state of the Croats and other peoples inhabiting it rather than, as formulated previously, the state of the Croatian and Serbian peoples as well as of others inhabiting it. The legal subtlety automatically left Serbs who used to be a state-forming nation in the position of a minority. Discontent with the downgrade, Serbs launched a referendum of their own in August 1990, during which, however, their response was limited to asserting their right to sovereignty and autonomy within Croatia. Secession was not on the agenda, but the Croatian government nevertheless resorted to force to prevent the referendum from taking place, and the moment marked the onset of the armed conflict in the republic.

Serbs of Croatia offered a political solution even after the incident. On September 30, 1990 the Serbian National Council proclaimed the autonomy of the Serbian people on the ethnic and historical territories they inhabited within Croatia as a member of Yugoslavia, but Zagreb's course agreed with German advisers remained unchanged. The new Croatian constitution entered into force on December 22, and the very next day the neighboring Slovenia called an independence referendum during which 94% of the ballots were cast in favor of separation from Yugoslavia. Interestingly, over the weeks preceding the enactment of Tudman's constitution Washington kept calling the Croatian leaders to exercise restraint and to avoid steps prone with an armed escalation. Still, Berlin's influence prevailed, and German advisers managed to convince their Croatian protégées to act resolutely. On May 19, 1991 the Croatian administration held a referendum with over 94% of those who went to the polling booths opting for immediate secession. The Serbs of Croatia did not attend, and Germany assisted by Vatican promptly ensured the European recognition of the two new independent countries. Soon Sarajevo followed the suit, massive fighting swept across the Balkans, NATO got the desired pretext for intervention, and Germany emerged as the key force in the new European geopolitical architecture.

Balkan Shadow of Berlin Celebration

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Praising the German unification, we should not forget how the fall of the Berlin Wall cast a shadow over other countries and their peoples.

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