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Citation for final published version:

Lorman, Thomas and Heimann, Mary 2024. Head to head: How do Europe's Cold War divisions persist? *History Today* 74 , pp. 8-10.

Publishers page: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/how...>

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How do Europe's Cold War divisions persist?

Cold War divisions in Europe persist in various ways. NATO, created in 1949 as a bulwark against Soviet-backed Communist expansion is still with us, even though the Warsaw Pact has gone. The notion of 'the West' as an entity which joins together US and (Western) European interests is another Cold War legacy. The fact that Communist regimes across East-Central Europe were not only overturned, but utterly discredited, in the years 1989-1991 led to profound change across Europe. Some effects are only beginning to be felt. In the post-1989 race to join NATO and the European Union, which was understood by post-Communist governments to be crucial, new regimes across the former 'Eastern bloc' rewrote their official state histories. In rejecting Communism, they oversimplified the past, often contradicting the lived experience of their citizens. Where dominance by the Communist Party had been a fact of life, Western Cold War notions of 'opposition' seldom fit. Nor did much self-consciously progressive Western thinking, from feminism and anti-racism to LGBTQT rights. Western Liberals, shocked by some of the attitudes they encountered, resorted to explanations close to Marxist notions of 'false consciousness' to explain why, for example, the word 'feminism' was scorned in so much of the former Eastern Bloc; why the Holocaust was not treated as central to the Second World War; and why nationalist rivalries seemed so intense and unforgiving. The experiences of those who had explicitly opposed Communist regimes became central to official state narratives and national memory as described in textbooks, documented on state television and celebrated in museums. Other attitudes could be heard on the streets. Western Liberal narratives, it seemed, offered the only politically acceptable pasts for states wishing to benefit from membership in NATO, the EU, or investment from Western firms, NGOs and charities. Those who had grown up in the East, with different experiences and expectations, saw their past written out of existence, treated as a wrong turning in history. The most significant legacy of the Cold War in Europe today lies not so much in political structures as in attitudes and mentalities.

(345 words) Mary Heimann, Chair in Modern History, Cardiff University