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## The cultural politics of commemoration: Media and remembrance of the Russian revolutions of 1917

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Chatterje-Doody, Precious N and Gillespie, Marie (2019). The cultural politics of commemoration: Media and remembrance of the Russian revolutions of 1917. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (Early access).

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1367549419871355>

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**The Cultural Politics of Commemoration: Media and remembrance of the Russian Revolutions of 1917 (for special issue - The Cultural Politics of Commemoration: Media and remembrance of the Russian Revolutions 1917)**

Journal:	<i>European Journal of Cultural Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	ECS-18-0123.R1
Manuscript Type:	Special Issue
Keywords:	cultural commemoration, media commemoration, Russian revolution, cultural memory, remembrance, centenary, RT (Russia Today), newsmaking, forgetting, nation projection
Abstract:	<p>The year 2017 marked the centenary of the revolutions of February and October 1917 which led to the collapse of the Russian Empire. These events (and their accompanying mythologies) proved pivotal in creating a uniquely politicised approach to remembrances of revolution across and beyond the post-Soviet space. This special section uses the revolutions' centenary as an entry point for reassessing the cultural politics of commemoration. In particular, it draws attention to the transformations in memory work brought about by an increasingly integrated global media environment, in which interactions between multiple cultural actors influence the formation of (and exclusion from) cultural memory. These diffuse memory making processes influence contemporary political and social developments within and beyond the societies in question.</p> <p>The articles presented in this special section interrogate how Russian and international media represented the revolutions, both for their domestic and international audiences. Together, they address questions about what regime-sponsored narratives of the Russian revolutions of 1917 can tell us about contemporary neo-authoritarian politics of identity, history and memory; the cultural significance of real-time, interactive media events for 'memory work', and for the participatory re-creation of revolutionary ideas and passions; the ways in which TV audiences and social media users of different generations and political persuasions respond to and interact with representations of revolution; and the nature of the relationship between cultural politics, memory and newsmaking. In bringing into dialogue work from a variety of disciplines and with a range of methodological approaches, then, the articles in this special section interrogate the fundamentals of the relationship between culture, media and politics in today's globalised real-time media ecology.</p>

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## Introduction to Special Section

### The Cultural Politics of Commemoration:

#### Media and Remembrance of the Russian Revolutions 1917

The revolutions of February and October 1917 which led to the collapse of the Russian Empire were widely commemorated during 2017. The Bolshevik takeover of power in October and the mythologies that developed around it were not just crucial to the development of the Soviet Union. They also helped to create a uniquely politicised and conflicted approach to remembrances of revolution in and beyond the post-Soviet space. This special section presents a timely reassessment of the cultural politics of commemorations of the Russian Revolutions of 1917; it does so at a time when the interactive character of the global media environment poses unprecedented challenges, especially for neo-authoritarian regimes seeking to mobilise cultural memory for benign and malign political ends.

Anniversaries spark renewed attention to past events from politicians, journalists, publics and, nowadays, citizen-journalists and social media users alike (Jeffery, 2015; McCartney and Morgan-Owen, 2017; Trubina, 2010: 66). The newsworthiness afforded to anniversary moments precipitates close, if fleeting, connections between contemporary journalism and forms of cultural commemoration (Zelizer and Tennenboim-Weinblatt, 2014; Merrill, 2017). At the same time, the interest piqued of and between opposing ideological groups or political factions can trigger deep conflicts over matters of interpretation of past events (Mycock, 2014; White and Marnane, 2016). As this special section will demonstrate, the ways in which past events are commemorated reveals much about how narratives of nation are interwoven with matters of contemporary political and social concern (Rigney, 2018: 242). It also lays bare the ways in which the interactive media environment brings competing perspectives and narratives of revolution into unavoidable dialogue and/or collision. Neo-authoritarian regimes worldwide now exercise only partial control of their media for domestic and international audiences. Interactive processes can easily scupper any intentional or official messaging about historical events. Arising from collaborative research on 'Reframing Russia for the Global Media Sphere', the articles presented in this special section contextualise our case studies in the putative shifts from Cold War politics to Information War media.<sup>1</sup>

Using media representations of the centenary as our entry point into multi-disciplinary analyses of the Soviet and post-Soviet legacies of the revolution, we offer original theoretical and empirical insights into the cultural politics of both remembrance and forgetting. As Renan pointed out, a nation is as much what it chooses to forget as what it remembers (Renan, 1882: 8). The papers collected here investigate the commemorative strategies deployed by Russia's state channel RT (formerly Russia Today), alongside other international media and cultural events in remembrance of the revolution from different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives (cultural and media studies, Russian studies, history, politics and international relations). In so doing, we build upon the work of a number of recent EJCS contributors on cultural commemoration and heritage (e.g. Szostak and

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<sup>1</sup> The research was undertaken as part of the AHRC-funded project (AH/P00508X/1) "Reframing Russia for the global mediasphere: from Cold War to 'information war'?" ([www.refamingsussia.com](http://www.refamingsussia.com)).

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3 Mihelj, 2017; Reading, 2011; Pamment and Cassinger, 2018). We bring this work into dialogue with  
4 theorisations of cultural remembrances of a “problematic past” (Huxtable, 2017), writing on the  
5 intersections of national and transnational commemoration (Velicu, 2011), theorisations of media  
6 and memory (Garde-Hansen, 2011), ethnographic and computational analyses of news audiences  
7 and social media users, on Twitter especially (Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2015; Burchill et al 2015).  
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10 Pegged to the central media event of the 1917 centenary, our contributions pay particular attention  
11 to transformations in ‘memory work’ brought about by developments in the transnationally  
12 connected, interactive online media environment without losing sight of press and broadcast news  
13 media. Our starting premise is that the “imagined community” of the nation is continuously  
14 mediated, pre- and re-mediated through contests, conquests and commemorations, and the  
15 circulation of symbolic artefacts (Anderson, 1983; Bolter and Grusin, 2000; Dayan and Katz; Erll and  
16 Rigney 2009: 1). Furthermore, “particular media (print, television, theatre and the internet) and  
17 particular cultural forms (epic, melodrama, testimony and so on) help to shape memory while  
18 involving heads and hearts in distinctive ways” (Rigney, 2018: 243). The circulation of schemata and  
19 templates for remembering means that in the contemporary global media environment, broadcast  
20 and online interactions between cultural actors can be particularly influential in the re-formation of  
21 cultural memory and its boundary-marking practices - delineating whose lives and activities are  
22 included and excluded in national memory frames. Here, we take cultural memory to refer to the  
23 wide-ranging repertoire of artefacts, sites, ceremonies, institutions, rituals and myths through which  
24 a national ‘imagined community’ interprets, organises, performs and enacts its relationship with the  
25 past. Paying particular attention to the dynamics of presence and absence and the performative, co-  
26 constructive nature of social media commemorative events, the contributions to this special section  
27 offer a compelling account of new forms of mediated memory within the contemporary global  
28 media context.  
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35 In characterising the contemporary media environment, a common presumption is that “personal  
36 experiences and emotions are taking precedence over expertise” (de Saint-Laurent et al 2017: 148).  
37 Another assumption is that news consumers often remain confined inside what have been termed  
38 filter bubbles and echo chambers. We seek to test such assertions empirically. We examine the  
39 extent to which news media consumption poses a challenge to expert knowledge, to the affective  
40 politics of ‘western media’ and to presumptions about audience formations as insular silos. Our  
41 study of cultural memory formations investigates the intricate relationship between academic and  
42 expert historical knowledge and lay or demotic interpretations of historical events and the pivotal  
43 role of media in connecting these realms. It is precisely the provocative collision of our own  
44 expertise as academics and lay or demotic interpretations of events that interests us here.  
45 Furthermore, the wide variety of actors who contribute to contemporary mediated  
46 commemorations, combined with the diversity of audiences engaging with different genres of  
47 performance make it extremely difficult to tease apart what constitutes cultural memory and the  
48 cultural and political significance of any one event. Bearing in mind the inchoate qualities of  
49 contemporary representations of remembrance, the articles presented here offer a variety of  
50 different optics through which they may be analysed.  
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57 These optics include: the relationship between mediated commemoration and constructions of  
58 ‘people’s history’; media pedagogy; public diplomacy; cultural and media constructions of national  
59 identity; regimes of representation; mediated processes of legitimation; and social reconciliation. So  
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3 far, debates on these topics have tended to occur internally, within particular disciplines. Yet, as the  
4 contributions to this special section make clear, these areas overlap in many ways, and we lose an  
5 important part of the puzzle when we attempt to separate out the cultural, political and historical  
6 significance of mediated commemorations. Only by using an explicitly multidisciplinary approach is it  
7 possible to understand how cultural commemoration of past events might impact on the cultural  
8 politics of nation re-formation and projection at a time when the term soft power has entered  
9 common usage. In particular, a multi-disciplinary approach enables us to question certain taken-for-  
10 granted assumptions about shared cultural memory (or whether any form of collective memory is  
11 even possible), by applying "theories built to explain other aspects of human life to shed light on  
12 collective memory" (de Saint-Laurent et al, 2017: 151).

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17 One of the most important aims of this special section, therefore, is to bring into dialogue work from  
18 a variety of disciplinary perspectives in order to contribute to contemporary European cultural  
19 studies research into constructions of the nation via media events and commemorations. Aside from  
20 being clearly anchored in specific empirical case studies, contributions within the collection develop  
21 theoretical insights in various directions. Politics and international relations perspectives are helpful  
22 in understanding the relationship between cultural memory projects and projections of national  
23 identity. Area studies inform analyses of how international dynamics play out within the particular  
24 local conditions. Political communication situates cultural memory projects within the broader  
25 repertoire of contemporary communications, whilst hermeneutic approaches facilitate in-depth  
26 analysis of such multi-platform media outlets as texts. Computer science enables big data harvesting  
27 and combines with social science tools to qualitatively analyse social media interactions. Sociological  
28 approaches provide a nuanced understanding of whether and how commemoration projects impact  
29 upon their audiences. We hope that the fruits of our collaborative labour will bring significant  
30 benefits to scholars working across these and related disciplines.

### 31 32 33 34 35 36 **Remembering Revolution and Reframing Russia for Today**

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38 The 'Reframing Russia' research underpinning this special section provides the first in-depth  
39 scholarly analysis of the multiplatform output and audience reception of the RT (formerly Russia  
40 Today) international broadcasting network via investigation of a series of media events. In particular,  
41 the project aims to understand: the ways in which RT projects narratives of Russian nationhood for  
42 its international audiences; how domestic narratives are adapted for international audiences; how  
43 particular grammars of identity and difference are represented in RT's output; RT's role within the  
44 wider 'information war' between Russia and the West; and crucially, the ways in which RT's  
45 audiences and social media users engage with its content, in this case around remembrances of the  
46 Russian Revolutions.

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50 RT's depictions of the centenary of the 1917 revolutions proved to be a particularly instructive case  
51 study in the complexities of present-day efforts by nation-states to project narratives, images and  
52 'spin' around major historical events. The 1917 revolution commemorations were repeatedly  
53 referred to in Russian and in international media as a difficult anniversary for the contemporary  
54 Russian ruling elite, whose main concern was to promote an image of stability not turmoil. Russia's  
55 leadership was therefore wary of the politically disruptive potential of contemporary revolutionary  
56 impulses that could be unleashed by the commemorations (Edele, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2017). As a  
57 result, questions before the centenary revolved around the extent to which state institutions would  
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3 actually directly engage with any cultural commemorations. As international relations specialist  
4 Precious N Chatterje-Doody and historian of Russia Vera Tolz argue in their paper in this volume,  
5 despite the establishment by Presidential Decree of a committee on commemoration of the  
6 centenary, no single narrative of the 1917 revolutions was discernible. Commemorative  
7 responsibilities were, in effect, distributed across a range of actors. Politicians' statements and  
8 commemorative practices in the public space were inconsistent, ambivalent and ambiguous. State-  
9 aligned media provided the most straightforward (yet unanticipated) narratives of the revolution  
10 and its legacies, but these outputs were clearly calibrated and differentiated in light of the political  
11 priorities for domestic and international audiences.  
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16 Such highly politicised mediation of revolutionary events, figures and symbols is a recurring theme in  
17 the contributions to this special section. In the case of Ukraine, film specialist Anastasiya  
18 Pshenychnykh interrogates how the 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014 provided new context for citizens  
19 to interpret 1917 and its symbols. In particular, a variety of films produced shortly afterwards to  
20 record the dismantling of Soviet-era monuments showed the continued salience of remembrance  
21 and ritualised forgetting in addressing traumatic events of both the distant and not-so-distant past.  
22 Contestation over the meaning of post-1917 monuments became nothing less than a 'spectacle of  
23 forgetting', she argues. A similar interweaving of politics and memory was evident in wider  
24 international media coverage. As international relations scholar Ben O'Loughlin's article  
25 demonstrates, this coverage was often concerned not just with the global consequences of 1917,  
26 but also with how the events and consequences of the revolution and the very notion of revolution  
27 could be brought into dialogue with national developments in the country of publication. For  
28 example, if publications in Western Europe were more focused on the Cold War trajectory that  
29 ultimately ensued, then media representations in post-colonial societies paid far more attention to  
30 the role of the 1917 revolution in forging their own narratives of national independence. The  
31 progressive legacies of the revolution similarly dominated the narratives produced by RT for its  
32 international audiences. This stood in stark contrast to the unprecedentedly negative representation  
33 produced by state-aligned media at home, which characterised both Bolsheviks and liberals as  
34 untrustworthy, at precisely the time when Russia's presidential campaign season saw the incumbent  
35 facing challenges from Communist and liberal challengers (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, this volume).  
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43 Whilst RT's audiences were generally well aware of its affiliation with the Russian state, they  
44 nonetheless expressed appreciation of its innovative main commemorative output, as analysed by  
45 political, social and computer scientists Rhys Crilley, Marie Gillespie and Alistair Willis in this volume.  
46 They convincingly show that the #1917LIVE multiplatform online reconstruction of events, a  
47 hundred years after the fact, engaged users in the performative reconstruction of revolutionary  
48 spirit through an immersive and interactive experience on Twitter. In contrast to expressions of  
49 mistrust about RT in general, social media users considered #1917LIVE to be an educationally-  
50 valuable, engaging and entertaining media product. In fact, its perceived historical accuracy and  
51 didacticism made #1917LIVE, according to focus group participants in the research, very "un-RT-like"  
52 (Crilley et al PAGE REF). Yet, this atypicality provides a useful window onto the network's operations.  
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57 Stephen Hutchings' contribution to this special issue adopts the premise that it is precisely via  
58 analysis of the atypical and liminal that the central meanings of cultural phenomena can be explored.  
59 His analysis is concerned with how "regimes of representation" (Hall, 1997) alter under conditions of  
60 mediatisation – when media penetration of all spheres of life is so complete that media no longer



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3 merely 'mediate' events external to them, but fuse with those events and both influence, and are  
4 influenced by, them (Lilleker, 2008; Hjarvard, 2008a; Asp, 1986; Schultz, 2004; Couldry and Hepp,  
5 2013). In interrogating just how #1917LIVE fits with RT's disruptive mainstream output, Hutchings  
6 observes this process in action, suggesting that the RT network has internalised its scandalous,  
7 'pariah' reputation within a fragmented institutional identity. It revels in and reproduces this  
8 characterisation in outputs and advertising alike. The 'information war' dynamic owes as much to  
9 this disruptive process as it does to direct Russian state manipulation of propaganda.

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13 This special section shows how just how valuable culture is as an entry point for the understanding  
14 of past and present political issues. In today's transnationally-connected global media environment,  
15 it is vital to consider the role of both old and new media in commemoration, in forgetting, as well as  
16 in the commemoration of the very moments of forgetting. Different types of societies have been  
17 seen to respond to the challenges of divisive memory in different ways (Kasbarian, 2017: 2). This  
18 being the case, the variety of remembrances of 1917 produced by affiliates of Russia's neo-  
19 authoritarian regime; by civil society actors in recent post-revolution Ukraine; and by international  
20 media outlets, provide useful points of comparison.

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24 The papers collected in this special section address questions about what regime-sponsored  
25 narratives of the Russian revolutions of 1917 can tell us about contemporary neo-authoritarian  
26 politics of identity, history and memory; the cultural significance of new forms of real-time,  
27 interactive, immersive media events for 'memory work', and for the participatory role of audiences  
28 in recreating revolutionary ideas and passions; the constraining and enabling opportunities of  
29 contemporary media for neo-authoritarian memory politics; the ways in which TV audiences and  
30 social media users of different generations and political persuasions respond to different  
31 representations of revolution and interact with its characters and narratives; and the nature of the  
32 relationship between cultural politics, memory and newsmaking. In bringing into dialogue work from  
33 a variety of disciplines and with a range of methodological approaches, then, the articles in this  
34 special section interrogate the fundamentals of the relationship between culture, media and politics  
35 in today's globalised real-time media ecology.

### 40 **Structure of special section**

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43 Our special section opens with Hutchings' paper, *Revolution from the Margins: Commemorating*  
44 *1917 and RT's Scandalising of the Established Order*. This paper considers RT's atypical #1917LIVE  
45 project as a window on its tendentious, mainstream output. Highlighting the project's chronotopic  
46 intertwining of past and present; its newsworthy 'event-ness'; and use of irony to manage a complex  
47 subject-object relationship in media outputs, Hutchings argues that #1917LIVE constitutes a new  
48 kind of media event. Its inherent reflexivity, carnivalesque and dialogic elements re-align this  
49 apparently atypical project with the network's mainstream outputs and indicate an internalisation of  
50 external critiques within a fragmented institutional identity. In interrogating these processes  
51 whereby external contexts and discourses are (re-)appropriated and (re-)oriented, this paper offers  
52 crucial insight into the workings of the broader 'information war' dynamic.

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56 In *Regime legitimisation, not Nation-Building: Media Commemoration of the 1917 Revolution in*  
57 *Russia's Neo-Authoritarian State*, Chatterje-Doody and Tolz situate RT's centenary outputs within  
58 the broader landscape of commemoration via Russian state-aligned media. RT's multivocal tribute to  
59 the cosmopolitanism and global benefits of the revolution would not have worked at home, given  
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3 that influential social groups have vastly diverging assessments of 1917. But far from providing an  
4 ambiguous, conciliatory line, domestic media stood out for its unprecedentedly and unambiguously  
5 negative representation of key personalities, events and legacies of the revolution. There is good  
6 reason to believe that this novel narrative was developed in consultation with the Kremlin. So, even  
7 though the dramatic rewriting of national history is not conducive to nation-building, it was perfectly  
8 geared towards the real goal of commemoration here - regime legitimation during a Presidential  
9 election campaign fought primarily against the Communist party. Wildly diverging, conflicting and  
10 changeable historical interpretations are actually offered by closely allied political actors in order to  
11 'arrest' and neutralise the 'memory of the multitude' – the wide variety of historical interpretations  
12 in circulation. In so doing, they serve immediate political interests in legitimising the incumbent  
13 ruling regime.  
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18 The third paper in this special section considers the reception of #1917LIVE amongst its international  
19 audiences. In *Tweeting the Russian Revolution: RT's #1917LIVE and Social Media Reenactments as*  
20 *Public Diplomacy*, Crilley, Gillespie and Willis interrogate some of the specificities of the real-time  
21 social media re-enactment. They argue that 1917LIVE enabled audiences to interact with Russian  
22 history and culture in ways that promoted a positive feeling about both RT and Russia. This capacity  
23 for affective engagement came about from the project's collapsing of past into present; narrating of  
24 history from below; and provocation of discussion about the role of revolution in social  
25 transformation. Far from being just a site of contestation over the past, such forms of didactic  
26 entertainment on social media have the capacity to elicit affective identification with the characters  
27 and events involved. For this reason, public diplomacy projects like #1917LIVE can contribute to a  
28 short-term strengthening of the engagement required to create longer-term soft power effects.  
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33 International responses to the revolution are further explored in O'Loughlin's paper, *The October*  
34 *Revolution as a Global Media Event: Connective Imaginaries in 2017*, which looks at international  
35 news media representations of the centenary and its commemoration. In this relatively unusual case,  
36 the meaning of the 1917 centenary was not guided by the 'home' state, and O'Loughlin's paper  
37 shows the complexity and connectivity of the picture that emerged around the world. A proliferation  
38 of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary imaginaries resulted, which reflected visions of more  
39 recent revolutions in many countries; visions of the nature of contemporary Russian politics; and  
40 visions of how social transformation happens. In this regard, representations of historic revolution  
41 did not necessarily correspond clearly to specified typologies, but instead the subjects of  
42 remembrance – and of forgetting – appeared to be intimately bound up with present-day social and  
43 political concerns in the societies of publication.  
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48 It is this political currency of cultural commemoration and forgetting which comes clearly to light in  
49 the final contribution to this special section, Pshenychnykh's *Leninfall: The Spectacle of Forgetting*.  
50 Through an analysis of the documentaries produced to chart the dismantling of Soviet-era  
51 revolutionary monuments, Pshenychnykh shows how citizens' attempts to reconstruct national  
52 identity following the 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014 revealed varied, complex and at times  
53 unpredictable responses to top-down memory projects. In particular, this new revolution became a  
54 lens through which many viewed not only the need to 'forget' the original symbols of 1917, but also  
55 to commemorate this ritual forgetting through videos which recorded for contemporary and  
56 subsequent generations, the dismantling and erasure of cultural memory of the Soviet past.  
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3 As the contributions to this special section show, today's global media environment is inherently  
4 participatory. Multiple actors with diverging perspectives and specific interests of their own, all  
5 contribute to contemporary processes of cultural commemoration. This means that there is no  
6 predictable relationship between cultural commemorations and the politics of identity, political  
7 legitimization, nation narration, newsmaking and memory work. Given the rapidity of online  
8 circulation processes these relationships are mutually-shaping, unpredictable and have unforeseen  
9 consequences. This, then, produces a raft of new challenges when it comes to addressing the  
10 controversial memories of the Soviet era. What is more, such challenges are as likely to influence  
11 elite-led as bottom-up commemoration, and to operate internationally as well as domestically, since  
12 the lines between these commemorative arenas are fundamentally blurred. In mobilising the central  
13 theme of revolution as a prism, we have brought into dialogue multi-disciplinary perspectives on,  
14 and methodological approaches to, cultural commemoration. In so doing, we hope that our  
15 collaborative approach to addressing each of these issues - and their interrelationship - will  
16 contribute to scholarly debates in European Cultural Studies and beyond about cultural  
17 commemoration, mediation and nation narration.  
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