The editors of this volume, Julie Buckler and Emily D. Johnson, have compiled an impressive collection of articles concerning cultural memory and commemoration in a number of locations in Russia and Eastern Europe. Cultural memory, as the editors frame their subject, “is dynamic, always the product of dialogue and interplay” (2013:9). Various views of the past challenge one another and shift over time; memories are diverse, and events are subject to multiple interpretations. Points of divergence between perspectives and friction within commemorative rites are central considerations of many of the collection’s essays, which examine the uses of public spaces both by those making official declarations about the past and by those responding to such declarations. The editors refer to the writings of Pierre Nora, and the motif of sites and events as anchors for memory runs through the volume as a whole. It is not only the subjects of commemoration or its forms that these writers treat, but also the significance of claims and silences about the past.

The strength of the volume lies in its success in drawing a diverse set of texts into productive dialogue with one another. Each article stands alone as a rich analysis of commemoration in a particular context. At the same time, the shared themes among the contributions are many. The result is a conversation that reflects the editors’ care in compiling the contributions and individual authors’ engagement with one another’s texts.

From Moscow and St. Petersburg in the time of Peter the Great to Sighet Memorial Museum in contemporary Romania, the subjects of the articles span a wide swath of history. Most contributors, however, concentrate on the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, considering commemorations in relation to national sentiments, Soviet ideology, and other types of collective and personal visions. A number of the articles examine past events through detailed readings of newspaper articles, official documents, memoirs, and other historical accounts. Other pieces analyze works of literature, film, art, and architecture, at times juxtaposing examples from two genres. Still other essays in the volume draw on survey research or narrate paths through memorial spaces, most in combination with another of these approaches.

The first group of articles in the collection explores the significance of particular urban locales for commemoration. Two focus on events in St. Petersburg, one by Michael S. Flier on celebrations of the Festival of the Epiphany by Peter the Great and a second by Emily D. Johnson on the delayed festivities for the 250th anniversary of the founding of the city. Prague, on the occasions of funerals for two Czech poets, and Odessa, as portrayed in The Battleship Potemkin and other works, are the subjects of two additional analyses of urban memory by Marek Nekula and Rebecca Stanton, respectively. Together, these essays demonstrate various ways that the physical and
social structures of urban centers make possible and lend symbolic weight to the rituals that take place within them.

Attention to the framing and style of memorial practices unites the articles in the second section of the book. Luba Golburt writes about portraits and poems honoring military heroes of the nineteenth century and earlier times, while Julia Beckman Chadaga considers the glass structures of architects and designers memorializing Lenin, the October Revolution, and Soviet ideals. The paintings, texts and structures, the authors demonstrate, variously embody past and present values. Meanwhile, sculptures, exhibitions, and newspaper articles, such as those marking International Women’s Day in the early 2000s, offer opportunities to reflect on women of previous generations and the norms and practices that shaped their experiences. In each case, analysis reveals multiple memories of, and varied responses to, figures and images from the past.

Several articles specifically discuss memory of war. Julie Buckler traces changes to the Borodino battlefield over time and under changing political regimes, while Karen Petrone analyzes changes to the Moscow City Fraternal Cemetery. Alterations in ideologies and political priorities, the works show, have rendered memorial practices uneven at both sites. A 1910 commemoration of the Battle of Grunwald in Poland is the focal point of a third piece on war. This one, written by Patrice Dabrowski, illustrates the challenges of fitting the struggles of one time into the frameworks of another.

The volume concludes with analyses of the ways that trauma is remembered at sites of massacres and incarceration: Katyn, in Russia, Khatyn’ and Kuropatyn in Belarus, and the Sighet Prison in Romania. As a group, these pieces suggest the power of memorial language and style for the shape of memory. Choosing to frame a mass killing as genocide, James von Geldern argues, both opens and closes possibilities for memorialization, as does transforming a prison into a museum, according to Cristina Vatulescu. Serguei Oushakine, meanwhile, argues that claiming victim status places the weight of blame for traumatic events outside the immediate collective.

Most of the articles focus on places and events in Russia, with several pieces referring in distinct, but complementary ways to the same moments: Napoleon’s nineteenth-century campaign into Russia, World War I, and the Great Patriotic War. The contributions examining Eastern Europe (Ukraine; Bohemia, later to become part of the Czechoslovak Republic; Poland; and Romania) extend the discussion geographically while also revealing the extent to which themes, such as the pivotal role of commemoration in narratives of nationhood, are common across the region.

The volume thus offers lucid and compelling analyses of a wide range of memory practices and memorial sites. Readers interested in the history of Russia and Eastern Europe, as well as those wanting to deepen their understanding of its literature, arts, and its current social landscape will all find value in this collection. Students of cultural memory in other settings will also benefit from these clearly framed discussions. Together, the articles offer a strong contribution to writings on memory, demonstrating the deep value ascribed to the past across the region, and the equally profound challenges that commemoration entails.