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Day of passions: Orangemen celebrate the Battle of the Boyne

As Orangemen gather for the biggest day in the marching season, many Catholics will be lying low. It's a pattern mirrored around the world.

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As all of France gears up for a day of national celebrations to mark the storming of the Bastille, festivities are also underway in one part of the UK.

But as 12 July dawns across Northern Ireland, there are plenty who would argue it promotes anything but liberté, fraternité and égalité.

"The Twelfth" is the biggest day of the Protestant marching season and in Belfast is marked by a procession of thousands of Orangemen through the city.

The day is the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, when Protestant King William of Orange defeated King James, a Catholic.

But while plenty of Protestants see the holiday as an excuse for hearty revelry, Catholics take the opposite view. Many choose to lie low, staying at home or even taking off on holiday.

Although last year the day passed off peacefully, in the past it has been marked by outbreaks of violence as tensions between



Thousands turn out in Belfast to march on "The Twelfth"

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the two sides have come to a head.

Across the Irish Sea, plenty view these unfolding hostilities with bafflement. But in other parts of the world millions of people would recognise the seething tensions and sporadic violence that sometimes accompany Northern Ireland's celebrations.

In Israel, Arabs and Jews are divided when it comes to the country's annual festivities in May. While the majority of Israel's people celebrate the founding of the state in 1948, Palestinians call it "al-Nakba" - the Arabic word for catastrophe.

For them the day marks the occasion when thousands lost their homes and hundreds of villages were razed to the ground to make way for Jewish dwellings.

On the occasion of Israel's 50th anniversary, in 1998, eight Palestinians were killed and 200 injured during clashes with Israeli troops following a solidarity march.

Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority had urged people to participate in the march. Protestors held aloft black flags and big keys to symbolise the homes they had lost.

Same day ... different name

Russia is still struggling to change the face of its annual October Revolution holiday, on 7 November.

After the fall of the communist system, president Boris Yeltsin decided to keep the holiday, but rename it Day of Accord and Reconciliation. Most still know the day under its original name, and communists continue to use it to protest against their country's new-found capitalist credo.

In 1997, on the 80th anniversary of the October Revolution, 15,000 hardline communists marched through central Moscow waving Soviet flags, blaring revolutionary songs and shouting anti-Yeltsin chants.

This year was the first to see Martin Luther King Day recognised



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by 50 American states, after New Hampshire finally fell into line.

Shared honour

Although the day was decreed a federal holiday in 1986, plenty of states refused to recognise it. Many gradually came round to the idea, although in some southern states the late civil rights leader must share his day with Robert E Lee, the famous civil war Confederate general.

New Hampshire, which is famously conservative and has a relatively small black population, had previously called the holiday - which marks Luther King's 15 January birthday - Civil Rights Day.

Its strong significance has been known to spark trouble. In 1998 protesters in Memphis scuffled with police at a Ku Klux Klan rally that included speakers who objected to the holiday.



In New Zealand, the anniversary of the signing of the country's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, is typically a focus for Maori grievances.

Martin Luther King Day came 18 years after his death

The government pulled out of celebrations at Waitangi, where Maori chiefs and British representatives signed the treaty 160 years ago, following dramatic protests at the 1995 event.

Activists demanding Maori sovereignty had spat on the Governor General, abused diplomats and trampled on the New Zealand flag.

Two years ago, then opposition leader Helen Clark was reduced to tears after an activist refused to let her speak on the Waitangi marae (Maori meeting house).

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