# Violins and trowels for Palmyra

## Post-conflict heritage politics

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1. A full timeline of the Russian intervention in Syria, and Palmyra specifically, is available on the website of the Kremlin-controlled news outlet RIA Novosti: https://ria.ru/trend/Palmira_freed_27032016/.

2. Statements in the Russian press (RIA Novosti, RT and Regnum) and press bulletins from different ministries and the Kremlin will stand central in this analysis.

3. A video of the full concert is available on the RT website: https://www.rt.com/news/341983-russia-gergiev-orchestra-palmyra/.

4. For the complete interview with Karmov: https://riafan.ru/654100-palmira-budet-vosstanovlena-rossiiskie-specialisty-dali-odnoznachnyi-otvet.

5. During the televised event in Palmyra, the camera frequently focused on the audience in the amphitheatre; representatives from Syria's different religions and people from different minorities dressed in traditional clothing were amongst the most commonly captured participants.

6. Johan Galtung first coined the term structural violence as a type of non-physical coercion that is 'built into the structure and shows

The endless reproduction of images of plundered museums, exploding mosques and bulldozed ancient sites has strongly prescribed the visual culture of the war in Syria and Iraq. There is little doubt that the Islamic State's (IS) carefully staged destructions have achieved their goal in triggering a strong outcry from international organizations and pundits demanding direct action against these 'war crimes' against 'civilization'. However, not only do many of these bold reactions lack analytical depth, but the stream of poignant statements about the loss of cultural objects that are intrinsically part of a Western global memory (e.g. Palmyra) flooding social media and mainstream media outlets feels at odds with the daily humanitarian suffering and enormous loss of life.

Although we should be careful with our reactions against propagandist 'heritage' statements directed at a Western audience, at the same time, we cannot deny that deconstructing this heritage violence provides important insights into the multidimensionality of contemporary warfare and the important role of culture in perpetuating physical violence.

Commentary from anthropologists on heritage destructions in the Middle East has been especially successful in providing an alternative viewpoint to contributions from the political sciences and international relations that read the conflict predominantly through a geopolitical lens. A contextual reading of the 'spectacles of destruction' has, for example, traced the representation strategies employed by terrorists in their communications with adversaries and recruits (Harmanşah 2015). Other work has appropriately placed recent destructions in a long history of heritage politicization, problematizing the many colonial genealogies prescribing political and cultural action in the Middle East (De Cesari 2015).

At the same time, ethnographic readings of the responses of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to heritage destruction in Syria have contributed to our understanding of the decision-making processes and power relations governing multilateral organizations (Meskell 2015).

Although further theorization about the rituality and disciplinarity of heritage destruction remains imperative, destruction is often not the most contentious episode in a heritage object's sociopolitical biography. The post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of a monument is often equivalently problematic (Pollock 2016). French and Japanese efforts to renovate Angkor Wat after the Cambodian civil war, for example, illustrate that renovation is often not so much about preserving the materiality of the past but about ensuring appropriate futures (Peycam 2016). At the same time, momentous investigations into the strategic funding of heritage conservation by American embassies have encouraged us to deconstruct the neo-imperialisms encoded in many rehabilitation programmes (Kersel 2015; Kersel & Luke 2015).

This article aims to explore the post-conflict futures of heritage sites in Syria and Iraq. Although it is too early to speak of a post-conflict situation (especially since the recent strikes ordered by President Trump), the territory of IS is dwindling and over the past year various factions have symbolically 'liberated' historical sites. Various national and international players have laid the groundwork for conservation and reconstruction projects, raising pertinent questions about the future of these heritage places.

One of the most enigmatic sites whose post-conflict future is being defined by a suite of international players is Palmyra. The recent biography of Palmyra does not merely illustrate that rehabilitation can be extremely political and violent (cf. Luke 2015). By focusing on the actions of the Russian Federation in defining the future of Palmyra, I would like to encourage readers to look beyond the US and Europe as the main players in cultural diplomacy and bring into the international limelight the various – often unknown – heritage development programmes that different global powers employ as part of their diplomatic toolkit.

Palmyra was first captured by IS in 2015 and it quickly took centre stage in their propaganda machine; parts of the ancient city were dynamited, hostages were beheaded in the ancient amphitheatre and even the caretaker of the site was publicly executed on site. On 27 March 2016, Palmyra was seized by a coalition of Syrian and Russian forces.[1] This first 'liberation' was quickly framed as a symbolic victory for the Russian-Syrian alliance against 'barbarism' and the US-led coalition. A Russian base was established in the city, ironically further destroying antiquities. Various international players were quick to demand an important role in the renovation efforts of the 'pearl of the desert'. However, the city was recaptured in December 2016 by IS, and several more structures were dynamited. On 3 March 2017, Russian-Syrian forces retook Palmyra and discussions about the rehabilitation of the site resurfaced (Fig. 1).

Drawing on seven years of ethnographic research into Russia's use of heritage and memory in the manipulation of its domestic and diplomatic fields of practice, I will contextualize the Russian 'post-conflict' manipulation of Palmyra as an artefact of political discourse. The representational politics will be studied to comment on how the site serves domestic political needs. The political context of the excavation and conservation efforts led by the Kremlin will be discussed to explore how Palmyra's future has become an important part of the Kremlin's diplomatic portfolio. A discursive reading of recent statements and performances by government officials and key archaeologists will serve as the empirical baseline of this study.[2]

### Politics of representation

One of the most notorious images of Russia's meddling in Syria must be the carefully choreographed spectacle 'A prayer for Palmyra' held on 5 May 2016 in war-torn Palmyra (Fig. 3). While sappers were still clearing explosives, the world-renowned Mariinsky Orchestra from St Petersburg performed three pieces of classical music in the site's Roman amphitheatre. Among the audience were leaders of Syria's different religions, people from different ethnic minorities, Syrian and Russian troops, Russian officials, heritage professionals and 10 key ambassadors to UNESCO. Broadcast by RT (a Kremlin-controlled English language news agency) the concert was quickly picked up by all major international 24-hour news networks. The hypermediated event not only put the revival of the Assad regime into the international limelight, it also provided Putin with a unique opportunity to present his world view to international and domestic audiences.

The whole event was framed as a voluntary initiative by Russia's cultural elite – a gift of the high arts to Palmyra, Syria and the whole world. In his opening statement, organizer Valery Gergiev criticized the opposing interests of the different coalitions by calling the concert an 'appeal for peace and concord'.[3] In a telecasted speech, President Putin explicitly thanked Gergiev and envoys of UNESCO for the organization of this 'great humanitarian' event.

up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung 1969: 171).

7. Although I agree that more standardized research on how Russia's intervention in Syria is depicted in Russian across different media is absolutely imperative, in RIA Novosti articles about the conflict (own examination of news articles since 2016) Palmyra is frequently mentioned or used as an accompanied imaginary.

8. Academic literature (Stent 2016; Zisser 2016) published about the conflict in Syria tends to explore Russia's involvement through the lens of international relations, focusing on the geopolitical alignments Russia could materialize through this conflict.

9. For interview see: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/53474.

10. For full interview see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/26/palmyra-restoration-isis-syria.

11. For full interview see: https://rg.ru/2016/07/06/piotrovskij-rossijskie-uchenye-vyleteli-v-palmiru.html.

12. For full interview see: https://ria.ru/world/20160331/1400357284.html.

13. For full interview see: https://ria.ru/world/20160331/1400357284.html.

14. For full interview see: http://www.russkiymir.ru/news/215427/.

15. For full details of the story, see reporting in the Russian media: https://rg.ru/2017/02/10/reg-ufo/britanskie-arheologi-nachnut-raskopki-v-krymu.html.

**Figs 1 & 2.** *On 3 March 2017, forces of the Syrian Arab Republic recaptured the ancient city of Palmyra, almost a year after they initially liberated the site (left). Almost immediately, Russian sappers started to clear mines and explosives in preparation for the reconstruction of the site (right).*

Despite efforts to frame the initiative as a spontaneous, internationally supported event, the spectacle could be traced back to Putin's *nomenklatura*. Gergiev had mounted similar concerts – during the Russian-Georgian war he organized a concert for Russian troops in Ossetia. Sergei Roldugin, one of the soloists performing at the Palmyra concert, was recently named in the Panama Papers as being in charge of Putin's financial assets.

The choreography of the concert was heavily encoded with strong political and cultural messages. The orchestra performed on the very stage where IS had publicly beheaded captives, and musicians wore all black, reminiscent of the executioner's clothes of IS militants (Fig. 5). By supplanting atrocity with classical music, Russia communicated that 'barbarism' had made way for high culture and arts. The performance by the Mariinsky Orchestra clearly responded to the '*mission civilisatrice'* of the Russian government, instantiating their involvement in Syria in civilizational and not geopolitical terms (Schoenbaum 2016).

However, by producing a place-based imaginary similar to IS's visual performances, the event's organizers engaged in a direct conversation with the terrorists. Clearly, Russia's similarly atavistic response upheld the *raison d'être* of IS's propaganda – provocation and reaction. The failure of Russia's liberation concert became poignantly conspicuous after the second recapture of the site in March 2017. Syrian and Russian troops quickly discovered that the terrorists had deliberately destroyed the backdrop of the concert, the monumental façade of the amphitheatre (Fig. 6).

Timur Karmov, a Russian archaeologist and part of the conservation team visiting the site after the first liberation, admitted that IS deliberately inflicted these specific destructions as a response to the concert:

> If the terrorist blew up monuments that they did not consider as deserving preservation because of their connection with pagan culture the first time, the second time they specifically blew up those monuments that acquired special symbolism [after the first liberation of the city].[4]

The Russian 'cultural gift' to Palmyra not only failed to safeguard the material fabric of the site, but it is highly questionable whether it was successful in undermining IS's political messages. Different scholars (De Cesari 2015; Harmanşah 2015) have recently argued that the devastation of heritage sites in the Middle East needs to be interpreted, on the one hand, as a criticism against the enduring dominance of the West in the Middle East, and on the other, as 'place-based violence that aims to annihilate the local sense of belonging and collective sense of memory among local communities to whom the heritage belongs' (Harmanşah 2015: 170). However, by uncritically using Eurocentric high art performances as a response to alleged 'barbarism', the Kremlin has further predicated the anti-imperialist metanarratives encoded in IS's destruc-

tions. Furthermore, the careful framing of Syria's ethnic and religious minorities during the concert[5] might have presented Russia's involvement in the war as being part of a struggle against ethnic and religious terrorism; it is highly questionable if Russia is primarily concerned with protecting minorities and their cultural heritage.

My own research on indigenous heritage issues in Russia indicates that protecting cultural diversity and historical objects is definitely not high on the Kremlin's agenda. Instead, heritage is skilfully manipulated as a technology of rule in the process of instilling new governmentalities. In the Altai Republic, I have documented how indigenous remains were repatriated by Gazprom (a parastatal gas company) in an effort to develop grassroots support for a large pipeline (Plets 2016b). In the Republic of Tatarstan, also a multicultural semi-autonomous federal subject, only historical narratives overlapping with the metanarrative of the Kremlin were communicated through the material fabric of World Heritage sites (Plets 2015).

Other research on the memory politics of the Second World War (Linan 2010; Wood 2011) similarly underlines how Russian heritage localities are subjected to 'place-based violence' in an effort to normalize political agendas and strategically undermine the collective agency of minorities. Although this heritage violence is not comparable to the physical destructions of IS in scope and intensity, the heritage violence inflicted by Russia is 'structural'[6] and is geared towards manipulating domestic public opinion and the global arena.

In the state-controlled Russian media, Palmyra has often been employed as a metonym for the broader Russian involvement in the conflict in Syria.[7] The benefits of emphasizing Palmyra are palpable: it depicts the war as part of a struggle for 'culture' and 'civilization' against 'barbarism' and 'extremism'. This message stands in sharp contrast to the way Russia's Syria agenda is depicted in the West. Both academic literature and popular media in the West *s*uggest that Russia's interest in the conflict is primarily connected to the 'Great Game' with the West and to maintaining a strategic position on the global stage.[8]

It is true that active participation in the war did enable the Kremlin to escape its self-inflicted isolation after the destabilization of Ukraine and Crimea (Stent 2016). Moreover, by framing Palmyra in its diplomatic portfolio, Russia was able to mask the geopolitical ambitions of its intervention and mend bridges with allies in the strategically important Middle East.

However, Russia's image management of Palmyra cannot only be tied to geopolitics. Mediating Palmyra in the public arena is equally on negotiating national legitimacy. Recent literature about the Ukraine conflict argues that foreign and domestic political spheres have become complexly intertwined in Putin's Russia (Lo 2015: 24-25). The economic embargo and low energy prices have com-



MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

SYRIA CENTRAL MILITARY MEDIA

16. Over the past decade, Russia has become a prominent member state of UNESCO. Through its unique diplomatic network, the Russian mission to UNESCO has been able to strongly influence decision-making processes at the World Heritage Committee. For a further reading see Plets (2015) and Meskell (2015).

17. Full resolution can be downloaded from the UNESCO website: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/.

18. Full transcript of the meeting of the 199th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO can be downloaded on http://unesdoc.unesco.org/.

19. See Pollock (2016) for an elaborate overview.

Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO 2016. The Palmyra chronicles. *Vestnik* 30: 3-22.

Crews, R. 2014. Moscow and the mosque. *Foreign Affairs* 93(2): 125-134.

De Cesari, C. 2015. Post-colonial ruins: Archaeologies of political violence and IS. *Anthropology Today* 31(6): 22-26.

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Harmansah, Ö. 2015. ISIS, heritage, and the spectacles of destruction in the global media. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78: 170-177. https://doi.org/10.5615/neareastarch.78.3.0170.

Kersel, M. 2015. Fractured oversight: The ABCs of cultural heritage in Palestine after the Oslo Accords. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 15(1): 24-44.

— & C. Luke 2015. Civil societies? Heritage diplomacy and neo-imperialism. In L. Meskell (ed.) *Global heritage: A reader*, 70-93. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Klejn, L. 2012. *Soviet archaeology: Trends, schools, and history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Klimowicz, A. & P. Klimowics 2013. The socio-political context of Polish archaeological discoveries in Faras, Sudan. In S. van der Linde (ed.) *European archaeology abroad: Global settings, comparative perspectives*, 287-306. Leiden: Sidestone Press.

Linan, M.V. 2010. History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43: 167-178.

Luke, C. 2015. Cultural sovereignty in the Balkans and Turkey: The politics of preservation and rehabilitation. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 15(1): 24-44.

plicated the regime's mode of government and negotiating of regime legitimacy. For years, ethnic and political stability was guaranteed through a 'social contract' (Sakwa 2014) that channelled oil and gas profits into societal programmes and welfare benefits. Today, as the redistribution of hydrocarbon profits is no longer tenable, the Kremlin has adopted the deep-seated 'besieged fortress' strategy in its governmentality efforts (Maria 2015).

Perfected during the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, the strategy of depicting Russia as an encircled fortress in a hostile landscape has historically enabled the Kremlin to bolster national cohesion and obfuscate deeply rooted socioeconomic and ethnic problems. Likewise, the war in Syria is spun out as a conflict in which the imperial West is sabotaging and delegitimizing an entrenched Russia in its fight against terrorism. For example, when Palmyra was recaptured by IS, Putin was quick to comment that the symbolically important city could not be held because of the US-led coalition.[9]

Since the conflict in Ukraine, Russia's bolstering of the 'besieged fortress' mentality has worked well in normalizing the verticality of the Russian state and its constitutive ideological agendas. During the heyday of the war in the Donbas, most of my interlocutors in the Altai Republic echoed the discourse of the Kremlin (Fig. 7). Friends and acquaintances refuted my questioning of the annexation of Crimea and stressed the importance of a strong united Russia. A poster campaign by some local shopkeepers even jokingly blamed the West for Moscow's largely self-inflicted sanctions that were crippling the Altaian economy. In making sense of problems that could be directly related to the policies of the Kremlin – such as the legal and political alienation of minorities – the conflict in Ukraine strongly disciplined indigenous people's political agency.

When respondents described the various political frameworks exacerbating the sociocultural disenfranchisement of Altaians in the Russian Federation, most would underline that although they found this problematic and would like it changed, this didn't mean that they were 'nationalists', 'extremists' or 'fascists' – signifiers frequently used by the Kremlin when describing the anti-Russian protests in Ukraine. Clearly, by carefully framing the Russian nation as being caught up in hostile global geopolitical waters populated with extremists, the Kremlin could underscore the importance of unity and regime support and suppress any criticism against deeply rooted political structures. Future research on how the conflict in Syria feeds into these governing efforts is imperative.

## Politics of reconstruction and excavation

While the imaginary of Palmyra has enabled Russia to stage the Syrian intervention at home and abroad, Russia has been seeking to take centre stage, together with the Assad regime, in defining the physical future of the site. Despite strong international opposition, archaeologists and conservationists from state-controlled research institutes have conducted survey work at Palmyra and have hastily drafted a reconstruction project. Some key government archaeologists have even publicly voiced an interest in complementing conservation work with new excavations in Palmyra and elsewhere in Syria. Archaeology's long history as a state-sponsored discipline (Meskell 1998; Trigger 1984) teaches us that such a rush to reconstruct and excavate abroad is rarely free from politics.

Even before Syrian and Russian troops liberated Palmyra, officials from the Assad regime were quick to underscore their intention to completely reconstruct the site. Maamoun Abdelkarim, director of antiquities of the Syrian Arab Republic, defended the reconstruction and argued that '[w]e have to send a message against terrorism that we are united in protecting our heritage'.[10] Further statements by Abdelkarim and Assad suggest that the current Syrian authorities are looking forward to reconstructing Palmyra, together with international partners and multilateral organizations like UNESCO. Russia echoed a similar message and quickly took a leading role in supporting the reconstruction plans.

Russia's archaeological community was quick to stress the importance of developing an international framework to support the Assad regime – instantiated as the legitimate polity of Syria – with the reconstruction of Palmyra. Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of the State Hermitage Museum, has been a dominant voice in this effort. He publicly argued for quickly restarting archaeological research and conservation in close collaboration with the Syrian Arab Republic. He even suggested founding a 'Russian archaeological centre' in Syria, similar to the Institut français du Proche-Orient in Damascus.[11] Piotrovsky defended the reconstruction of Palmyra by comparing it to the rebuilding of St Petersburg after the Second World War. He argued that a reconstruction was crucial because a reconstructed Palmyra would be a 'symbol of the victory of good over evil'.[12] In the aftermath of the concert in Palmyra he even publicly stated that he hoped the concert would convince UNESCO to finally start reconstructing the site. Piotrovski lambasted UNESCO for the delay, connecting it to 'political problems' inflicted by those member states (i.e. countries of the US-led coalition) that were 'to blame that [destructions] happened here [in Palmyra]'.[13]

It would not be the first time that archaeologists connected to Russian state-controlled research institutions and museums acted as *agents provocateurs*, normalizing the Kremlin's socioeconomic agendas or political hierarchies (Plets 2016a). During the Tsarist period, and especially since the Soviet Union, archaeologists served political interests at home (Klejn 2012) and abroad (Klimowicz & Klimowics 2013; Ure 2014) through archaeological excavations and expeditions. Makarov, head of the Institute of Archaeology at the Russian Academy of Sciences and also one of the spokespeople in favour of starting up excavation and conservation projects in Palmyra, has previously criticized modern indigenous minorities' political use of archaeological heritage by publicly questioning whether they have any biological link with the indigenous remains they want repatriated (Plets et al. 2013). After the annexation of Crimea, he also proudly stated that the reunification of Crimea in the Russian Federation had been beneficial to the archaeological heritage of the region, since looting had almost entirely ceased.[14]

Similarly, museums controlled by the Kremlin in Crimea have correspondingly used archaeology to legitimize the peninsula as part of Russia. In February 2017, officials from the regional government of Crimea proudly announced in the Russian media that British archaeologists from the University of Bristol had accepted an invitation to collaborate with Russian and Crimean archaeologists and conduct an excavation on a site related to the Crimean War.[15] The chairman of the government of Crimea further stressed the broader significance of this international research into the Crimean War and argued that the collaboration signified a favourable international future for Crimea, despite negative reporting in the European media. While military heritage instantiating Crimea as an intrinsic part of the Russian nation is being placed in the international limelight (see Teper 2016), the heritage of the Crimean Tatars (indigenous inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula) is being badly neglected (Wilson 2013).

In addition to co-opting its archaeological community, Russia has also mobilized its strong diplomatic position at UNESCO[16] to further a conservation framework including both the international community and Assad's geopo-

**(From left to right, above to below)**

**Fig. 3.** *On 5 May 2016, a large public event celebrating the liberation of Palmyra was broadcast on Russia's main international news outlets. During the event, members of the Russian cultural elite praised the efforts of the Syrian-Russian coalition in liberating the World Heritage marvel of Palmyra. Before Saint Peterburg's Mariinsky Orchestra performed, President Putin, in a telecasted speech, thanked organizer Gergiev, the members of UNESCO and Syrian forces for this 'great humanitarian' event.*

**Figs 4 & 5.** *Cellist Sergei Rodugin and members of the Mariinsky Orchestra performing on the spot where IS had previously held public executions. The musicians wore black clothing,*

**Fig. 6.** *After the second liberation of Palmyra, Syrian and Russian troops quickly discovered that the façade of the amphitheatre was destroyed as a response to the concert held in May 2016. reminiscent of the attire of IS executioners.*

**Figs 7 & 8.** *In the Altai Republic there are indications of support for Russian actions in Syria and Ukraine. During a spontaneous demonstration in 2014, protestors carried Russian flags and signs criticizing the destabilization of Russia's geopolitical landscape by the US. Some shop owners even put out signs banning President Obama from their shops in response to the economic sanctions imposed on the West by the Kremlin.*

Lo, B. 2015. *Russia and the New World Disorder.* Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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Sakwa, R. 2014. *Putin redux: Power and contradiction in contemporary Russia.* London: Routledge.

Schoenbaum, D. 2016. The violins of Palmyra: Soft power projection, then and now. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-05-26/violins-palmyra. (accessed 22 Feb 2017).

Stent, A. 2016. Putin's power play in Syria. *Foreign Affairs* 95: 106-113.

Teper, Y. 2016. Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: National or imperial? *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33(4): 378-396.

Trigger, B. 1984. Alternative archaeologies: Nationalist, colonialist, imperialist. *Man* 19(3): 355-370.

litically isolated Syrian Arab Republic. Weeks after the liberation of Palmyra, the Executive Board of UNESCO adopted the Russian-drafted resolution 'UNESCO's role in safeguarding and preserving Palmyra and other Syrian World Heritage Sites'.[17] Although the resolution itself was neutral in tone and did not name the Assad regime as one of the key stakeholders, Russia's *modus operandi* suggests it is geared towards internationally legitimizing Assad and his Syrian Arab Republic.

During the 199th session of the Executive Board, most member states carefully formulated their commitments and named the 'Syrian people' and 'Syrian society' as the beneficiaries of this resolution, and not the Syrian Arab Republic. However, when the Russian delegation thanked the other member states for adopting this resolution, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gennady Gatilov was more forthright in seeing this resolution as a token of support for the Syrian authorities: 'In this regard we welcome the efforts of Member States of the Organization to preserve the cultural heritage of the Syrian Arab Republic'.[18] In their quarterly bulletin, the Russian delegation to UNESCO further stressed the importance of UNESCO's support to the Syrian Arab Republic:

> The Executive Board … also urged the Director-General to lead coordinated action with stakeholders and render help to the Syrian Arab Republic by sending a mission of UNESCO international experts to Palmyra to assess the damage and draft a plan of further action to restore the terrorist-destroyed Syrian monuments as soon as the conditions are safe. (Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO 2016: 7-8)

Also, during the liberation concert in Palmyra, the UNESCO ambassadors participating in the event were used to perpetuate an Assad future. The speeches by Gergiev and Putin cultivated the impression that 'UNESCO representatives' were present to support the Syrian and Russian reclamation of Palmyra. Clearly UNESCO ambassadors had become, consciously or not, co-opted into the pro-Assad agenda of the Russian Federation.

These events teach us that defining and claiming the post-conflict future of Palmyra is politically imbued. Although there are many political intricacies governing the conservation efforts of Russia and Syria, three intertwined agendas can be identified.

Firstly, control over Syria's material past stands for control over Syria's future. By supporting the Assad regime in reclaiming Syrian heritage, Russia provides an embattled regime with the tools to project sovereignty at home and abroad.

Secondly, by strategically mobilizing its diplomatic networks through UNESCO, Russia helps a regime out of international isolation. By making the Assad regime a stakeholder in an international renovation effort supported by UNESCO, the Syrian Arab Republic is provided with political capital to find its way again on the international stage.

Thirdly, by taking centre stage in the renovation of Palmyra and other Syrian World Heritage sites, Russia positions itself in a favourable position for the reconstruction of Syria. This not only provides Russia with an important seat at international conferences and summits, it also enables Russia to expand ties with Persian and Arab partners.

In the face of growing tensions with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), building lasting alliances with nations from the Middle East has become essential (Crews 2014) – especially since Russian energy companies hold important concessions over oil and gas fields across the Arabic-speaking world and Middle Eastern countries are becoming a growing market for the Russian military industry.

## Conclusion

The ritual dilapidation of heritage sites by terrorist perpetrators might be an important episode in a site's cultural biography, but it is not the dramatic dénouement of a heritage object's political life. The destruction of a site is merely one of the many tumultuous instalments that heritage objects experience – nothing more than a prelude to yet another clamorous chapter in an endlessly enduring narrative of heritage politicization by governments, opposition forces and archaeologists. The strategic manipulation of Palmyra by the Russian Federation can, unfortunately, be placed in a long list of other cases where post-conflict heritage futures are carefully scripted for (geo)political purposes. Similar to developments in Angkor Wat and various other examples,[19] archaeologists and conservationists have become accomplices in perpetuating structural violence to cultural heritage and its custodians.

The rationale and ambitions behind post-conflict renovations are often prescribed by a suite of multifaceted agendas. At first sight, it might seem that Russia – as most literature suggests – is using Palmyra as a soft power tool to frame its involvement in Syria in civilizational terms and convince international audiences that its activity in Syria is not part of the 'Great Game' with the West. However, the discourse of government officials suggests that Palmyra serves a variety of other agendas.

In this short article, I have discussed two aspects of Russia's interest in Palmyra. Firstly, as a metonym for the war in Syria, Palmyra buttresses the image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' in a hostile landscape, a country that saves 'civilization' and 'culture' from terrorism and Western subversion. In the face of economic instability, the war in Syria takes attention away from the many socio-economic problems facing the Putin regime and calls various ethnic and political groups to close ranks and form a 'united Russia' – eponymous with Putin's political party. Secondly, by laying the groundwork for the rehabilitation of Syria's war-torn heritage, Russia not only hopes to have an influence in defining Syria's future, but by collaborating with the Syrian Arab Republic of Assad in these efforts it hopes to keep Assad in place. Furthermore, entangling UNESCO in the renovation of Palmyra could provide the Assad regime with a global platform and a seat at the table at future international conferences.

Ongoing atrocities by the various warring factions and precipitous interventions by key international players make it difficult to develop a clear in-depth understanding of the future of Syria's heritage. However, this does not mean we should not carefully monitor ongoing developments and voice apt criticisms. For ethnographers mapping the transnational entanglements defining global cultural politics, it is especially important to keep a keen eye on how multilateral organizations are used to script specific futures in the Middle East.

At the same time, archaeologists and heritage professionals must be aware of the political pitfalls associated with rehabilitating heritage sites in the aftermath of protracted international conflict. Executing renovations at illustrious ancient sites might provide international visibility, but the funding schemes enabling these reconstructions are rarely free from political influence and are imbued with geopolitical ambitions. ●

Ure, P. 2014. Byzantine heritage, archaeology, and politics between Russia and the Ottoman Empire: Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (1894-1914). PhD thesis, London School of Economics, London.

Wilson, A. 2013. The Crimean Tatars: A quarter of a century after their return. *Security and Human Rights* 24: 418-431.

Wood, E. 2011. Performing memory: Vladimir Putin and the celebration of World War II in Russia. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38: 172-200.

Zisser, E. 2016. Russia's war in Syria. *Strategic Assessment* 19(1): 41-49.