

RUSSIA IN PALMYRA

Contextualizing the Kremlin's Postconflict Heritage Rehabilitation Efforts

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the reconstruction efforts of Russian heritage scholars and institutions in Palmyra, Syria. There is little doubt that the financial opportunities provided by the Kremlin for the reconstruction of the war-damaged World Heritage site can be analyzed as propaganda directed at foreign audiences. Drawing on ethnographic and historical research on world heritage politics, this article contextualizes reconstruction efforts as part of a Russian cultural diplomacy goal that promotes the need for a multipolar world. The article also draws attention to the limits of describing Russian heritage reconstruction efforts as foremost international propaganda. The argument is that reconstruction efforts by Russia are deeply connected to domestic and international politics, propagating the Kremlin's grand narrative that portrays Putin as a leader of a global power that reclaims its status in the international arena. This signifies the increasing endeavors of states to utilize cultural assets for political and legitimization ends.

KEYWORDS: Palmyra, Russia, Syria, cultural diplomacy, Russian Geographical Society, Fortress Russia

On May 5, 2016, while military personnel were clearing explosives, the world-renowned Mariinsky Orchestra from Saint Petersburg played three pieces of classical music in the Roman theater of Palmyra. On the exact spot where terrorists of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (Daesh) decapitated prisoners and the site's caretaker, Bach, Prokofiev, and Shchedrin were performed for an audience of UNESCO ambassadors, Russian soldiers, and invited Syrian guests (Fig. 1). The concert was aired live on the Kremlin's international news outlet Russia Today and was picked up by a suite of international news agencies, including CNN. Just before the concert, President Putin praised the Russian cultural sector's efforts and thanked the orchestra's conductor, Valery Gergiev, for this "great humanitarian" event. Gergiev had organized such patriotic concerts already after the 2004 Beslan school massacre and during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Gergiev titled the concert in Syria in 2016, "Prayer for Palmyra—Music Revives Ancient Walls" and called humanity to unite for the restoration of the site that was liberated by Syrian-Russian forces on March 27, 2016.



FIG. 1

Putin addressing the attendees of the concert “A Prayer for Palmyra” by the Mariinsky Orchestra. (Photo by L-BBE, CC BY 3.0 [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>].)

Days after this concert, many Russian news outlets praised the efforts of the Russian military in safeguarding the site. Restoration and conservation plans by the Hermitage were immediately made public. Proudly, other heritage initiatives were being discussed, including excavations. At the same time, Russian top diplomats marshaled the global community to start reconstruction efforts as soon as possible.¹ A 2017 memorandum between UNESCO and the Hermitage made it clear that Russia would coordinate this effort in close collaboration with the Syrian authorities.² In September 2016, Russian archaeologists were already on site to document Palmyra’s war-damaged monuments with

photogrammetric techniques. And during the winter of 2021–2022 they started with the reconstruction of the Arch of Septimius Severus.

Both the hypermediatized event and physical “heritage aid” have often been theorized as a PR masterpiece through which the Kremlin bolstered its image and cultivated international support for its military intervention in Syria (Munawar 2017; Plets 2017; Schoenbaum 2016). By reminding international audiences that they were protecting symbolic heritage sites from “barbarism,” Russia presented itself to the world as a custodian of “civilization.”³ Clearly, Palmyra served diplomatic needs as an ideal soft power projection

(Schoenbaum 2016) to help Russia escape its geopolitical isolation that had followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kofman and Rojansky 2018). As such, Palmyra was yet another case where postconflict heritage reconstruction was used to serve geopolitical needs (Meskell 2018).

Both in popular media and academic publications, this politicization of Palmyra for international image-building has been critiqued as propaganda. In this article, we go beyond merely dismissing the actions of the Kremlin in order to contextualize and interpret the politics of postconflict heritage reconstruction. Timely research on the strategic funding by foreign nations for the reconstruction of war-torn heritage has brought the politics of "heritage aid" into the international limelight (Luke and Kersel 2013). Over the past decade, a growing heritage-diplomacy literature is reminding archaeologists and heritage practitioners that heritage often operates as an important pawn in a geopolitical chess game (Winter 2014). This article similarly identifies the structuring agendas at play in Palmyra. As such, it urges international teams enchanted by the prospect of setting up archaeological projects in postconflict Syria to consider the ethical dilemmas as well as the impact of furthering political agendas.

Because of the well-established heritage-diplomacy literature and the obvious geopolitical agenda of Russia's heritage-reconstruction efforts, it would be very tempting to explore the rehabilitation of Palmyra as mainly driven by international politics. Although heritage aid is indeed about subtly structuring power relations abroad, it is as much about domestic politics. The grand expeditions by European nation-states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt were as much about imperialism as they were about cultivating national pride and modernity at home (see also Munawar 2022; De Cesari 2015). Ultimately, postconflict heritage reconstruction projects are both geopolitical opportunities and part of domestic statecraft practices. Recent critical explorations into the foreign policy considerations of the Russian Federation have discouraged us to interpret the actions of the Kremlin in the Middle East and beyond as part of a neo-Soviet struggle for influence (Lipman 2015; Casula 2015). Rather, for Putin's regime domestic and foreign politics are always

imbricated, and activities abroad are strongly driven by a need to instill at home the image of the Russian nation as a strong civilization faced by international competition (Turoma and Mjør 2020; Chebankova 2020).

Because this domestic dimension has remained ignored in explorations of the postconflict politics of Palmyra, this article investigates and explains the symbolic instrumentalization of Palmyra by the Russian state for domestic political agendas. By studying the institutional context of current reconstruction projects, how these are presented in the government-controlled media, and the long history of Russian archaeological attention to Palmyra, we point at the contextual symbolism of Palmyra in Russian society and how in the selection and development of heritage aid programs domestic predilections influence reconstruction efforts. By stressing the domestic dimension of postconflict reconstruction and some key political agendas, beyond the geopolitical entanglements, this article contributes to the growing attention in archaeology and heritage studies directed at the ethics of rehabilitation of sites in the aftermath of war (Barakat 2020; Newson and Young 2022). Palmyra might be yet another example of the abuse of heritage; it contains important lessons for heritage practitioners and archaeologists.

Our analysis of the politicization of Palmyra draws on policy documents, speeches and statements by different officials, and official communication about excavation and heritage projects. To map the dominant discourses about Palmyra that are relayed to Russian and Syrian civil society by (state-controlled) media, all articles from 2016 to 2022 published about the site are studied. Because we want to understand the Kremlin's discourse, we analyze Russian and Arabic publications by the state-controlled news agencies TASS, RIA Novosti, Russia Today, Sputnik, and SANA. These sources are used in the second section of the article to outline the main events and initiatives of Russia in Palmyra since the site's destruction. The third section defines the geopolitical context of the reconstruction and structuring of diplomatic agendas. Subsequently, we contextualize Palmyra's domestic importance and the site's significance in Russian imperial imagination. We argue that because of a historical fascination with Palmyra, the site proved to be an ideal vehicle of cultural diplomacy that has the potential to

strengthen the Kremlin's power and legitimacy at home and bolster the image of Russia internationally.

Russia and Palmyra: From Destruction to Reconstruction

By 2015, the attention in the Russian media for the need to protect Palmyra's cultural heritage from the barbarism and iconoclastic attacks of Daesh radicals appeared to be a propaganda tool to justify military intervention in Syria. Once involved in the conflict, Russian forces not only helped the Syrian forces in liberating Palmyra but also in fighting armed opposition groups and other nonstate radical actors. Following the liberation of Palmyra, international actors started to think about rebuilding war-damaged heritage in Palmyra. One of those efforts was the Disney-style reconstruction of the Arch of Septimius Severus, conducted by the Oxford-based Institute for Digital Archaeology in collaboration with the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus (DGAM) (Munawar 2017).

While the West made plans for rebuilding Syria's war-damaged heritage, Russia also articulated heritage stewardship claims in conjunction with their military operation in support of Syria's government. Consequently, the Russian interests in Palmyra extended further to establish partnerships with the Syrian counterpart to work on archaeological and restoration projects. In March 2016, the director of the State Hermitage Museum, Mikhail Piotrovsky, declared that he and his staff at the Hermitage were working "informally" to plan the reconstruction of what war and violence had wrecked in Palmyra, or as he put it: "This is living antiquity."⁴ Piotrovsky's plans to rebuild heritage included not only cultural heritage in Syria, but those plans extend to conflict-damaged heritage in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, and Yemen.

Months after the 2016 liberation of Palmyra, archaeologists of the Russian Academy of Science, funded by the Russian Geographical Society (RGO), launched a project called "Palmyra in Time and Space." The Palmyra in Time and Space project team managed to model Palmyra's heritage in 3D just before Daesh reoccupied

the site. The 3D model of Palmyra aims to capture the comprehensive and accurate current state of the heritage monuments in a way that assists the reconstruction plans of Palmyra. The Institute for the History of Material Culture–Russian Academy of Sciences (IHMC-RAS) handed the 3D model to the Syrian archaeological authorities during the Saint Petersburg International Cultural Forum, held in November 2017.⁵ In September 2020, the RGO announced that the digital 3D model of Palmyra is available online.⁶ During an interview with Russia Today, Piotrovsky praised the joint efforts and stated that: "[the] 3D model of Palmyra [is] an important document for restoration of the ancient city."⁷ In 2019, the research of the RGO continued when they presented the "Palmyra—New History" project dedicated to the cultural heritage of Palmyra.⁸

The Russian interventions in the cultural sector in Syria have later been introduced within the framework of several agreements signed in 2019–2020 between Syrian and Russian cultural institutions, such as the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the RGO, and the Syrian DGAM.

In 2019, the first Syrian-Russian agreement was signed to restore the archaeological collections and the facilities in the archaeological museum of Palmyra, which was extensively damaged during Daesh's second occupation of Palmyra in 2016. Piotrovsky stated in a press release to the Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik that parts of the agreement had already commenced, such as the making of the 3D model of Palmyra, sending Russian conservators to train the Syrian staff of the DGAM, and the publication of a joint book on Palmyra.⁹ As a part of signing the agreement, Piotrovsky concluded the event with a lecture and a photo exhibition titled "The Two Palmyras" ("التدمريتان"), which emphasized the Russian "spiritual connection" between Palmyra and Saint Petersburg.¹⁰ The recently appointed General Director of DGAM, Mohammad Awad, explicitly stated that "the Russian friends helped liberating Palmyra, and now they contribute to rebuilding the city" and that the Russians will collaborate with the international efforts of UNESCO to coordinate the efforts to rebuild Palmyra's damaged heritage.

In late 2020, a third agreement was signed by the DGAM and the Russian Association of Stone Industry, as recommended by the Hermitage officials, to rebuild the Arch of Septimius Severus. However, those Syrian-Russian agreements did not manage to go as rapidly as planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ In the summer of 2021, the Syrian-Russian agreements came into force and started to be implemented in Palmyra. With these agreements, the Kremlin works hard using soft power to control vital sectors that have the potential for financial revenues coming from tourism once the security situation in Syria has stabilized.

During the preparation of this third agreement, a new memorandum was signed between the IHMC-RAS and DGAM to begin with the restoration of the Arch of Septimius Severus.¹² The accord was announced within the framework of the Fifth Syrian-Russian joint meeting that was intended as a follow-up to the international conference on the return of Syrian refugees and displaced people held in Damascus. In this document, a new local partner in the restoration works was named, the Syrian Trust for Development (STD). In the past few years, STD became increasingly involved in the cultural sector in Syria as one of the nongovernmental organizations concerned with local well-being and preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. STD was responsible for the submission of nominations for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, leading, for example, to the acceptance of Al-Qudoud al-Halabiya in late 2021. It is worth noting that the STD was established in 2001 by Asma al-Assad, the wife of the current Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, a few months after he came into power in July 2000.

Those collaborative and joint Syrian-Russian efforts and agreements to assess, document, and rebuild damaged cultural heritage in Palmyra show the extent to which archaeological remains and Syrian archaeologists are used to represent the Kremlin's efforts of boosting the legitimacy of the Russian intervention in Syria—an effort by which Russia is granting itself a foothold in crucial postconflict projects, including projects and plans in the political, economic, humanitarian, and cultural sectors.

Russia and Palmyra: The Geopolitics of Creating a Multipolar World

The speeches preceding the Prayer for Palmyra concert best underline that Russia was targeting an international audience through Palmyra. Gergiev addressed the crowd in Russian and English, and in his message, he was also mobilizing people beyond Russia to undertake action. Similarly, the Russian President positioned the Syrian-Russian liberation as a gift to humanity and civilization. He encouraged everyone to see this event as part of the global war on terror and understand “every victory and success in the fight against terrorism as our common victory.”¹³ Evidently, Russia was the savior of Palmyra and was doing humanity a huge favor. In the various projects, cooperative frameworks, and diplomatic discussions that would follow, Russia time and again mobilized the site as part of its geopolitical portfolio.

The site served a suite of political needs and one can connect the messaging around, and investments in, the site to a broad variety of important topics in Russian foreign policy. We contend that three interconnected agendas are especially relevant for heritage workers and archaeologists: (1) winning hearts and minds abroad, (2) reintroducing the Syrian government to the international community, and (3) (re)establishing Russia as a key geopolitical player in a post-Crimea multipolar world. We believe (foreign) archaeologists help further these policy goals when participating in projects in which the Russian and Syrian state or cultural institutions are involved.

Our argument is as follows. First, public diplomacy throughout the 2000s and 2010s has been an important policy instrument of the Kremlin to shape the international arena (Velikaya and Simons 2020). With public diplomacy, states try to cultivate certain images and agendas among foreign audiences and civil societies. Although Russia's use of soft power is less institutionalized and more ad hoc than for example the United States' or China's, over the course of the last two decades it has instrumentalized (popular) culture, media, and education to bolster its international image (Ageeva 2021). Of course, part of this effort was to appeal to the international market and promote Russia as a trustworthy country for investment. A key goal has been to discredit

the negative depictions in Western media and provide alternative understandings of Russia's political ambitions. Russia Today perhaps best embodies this dimension of Russia's public diplomacy efforts and how it tries to delegitimize Western understandings of the world and attract global audiences through carefully inserted narratives and staged broadcasts (Yabolokov 2015), such as the *Prayer for Palmyra*.

Since 2012/2013 the narrative of Russian projects abroad has evolved. Instead of appealing to a wide audience, increasingly Russia has been trying to position itself as a conservative nation and the "last stronghold of traditional values in the world" (Ageeva 2021: 135). By openly celebrating patriotism, relaying anti-LGBTIQA+ discourses, and stressing the importance of the Christian Orthodox faith, it has sought to establish cooperation with nativist parties in Europe and beyond. As a heritage site whose roots are deeply entangled with colonialism and Euro-centric discourses, Palmyra helps to project Russia as the protector of Western civilization against barbarism. The discourse in both Russian media and policy documents about Palmyra further strengthens this conservative understanding of the material culture of the Near East, and it echoes Western colonial appreciation and valuation of oriental antiquities. Archaeological rescue work helps in materializing the imagination of Russia as a steady nation physically restoring the roots of civilization.

Second, the international restoration projects developed by the Kremlin present themselves as soft and innocent vehicles through which the Syrian government can be brought out of geopolitical isolation on international and regional levels. Since the beginning of Syria's armed conflict, a handful of states across the world either recognize the Syrian opposition as the official representatives of the Syrian people or have halted any diplomatic interaction with the al-Assad government. In all its international development projects in Syria, Russia involves the Syrian government as the legitimate stakeholder and collaborator. When the site was recaptured, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gennady Gatilov passionately thanked the Syrian government's army for the liberation of the site during the 199th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO (2016). He continued to call on the

international community to collaborate with Russia and unite for humanitarian purposes. He ironically challenged the West in arguing that inaction and unwillingness to collaborate would be seen as a politicization of heritage.¹⁴

It would become clear that the key beneficiary of foreign aid and key collaborator in these international projects would need to be the Ministry of Culture of Syria's government. For example, in the 2017 memorandum between UNESCO and the Hermitage for the joint reconstruction of Palmyra, again the Syrian authorities are positioned as the single most important partner.¹⁵ Russia tries to provide the Damascus-based Syrian government with a seat at the international table and to bring it out of isolation through Palmyra. Similarly, the main protagonists in the reconstruction efforts in Palmyra have been trying to actively recruit international teams to become involved and acquire an international mandate for the Palmyra reconstruction project.¹⁶ If international teams were to engage in this project, or organizations such as UNESCO were to provide even more funds and support for the reconstruction projects, both the Kremlin and Syria's government would in this manner be provided an instrument to polish their image.

Third, the active involvement of the Kremlin in defining the postconflict future of Palmyra—and Syria more broadly—is an expression of Russia's quest for multipolarity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, different political groups within Russia have lamented the loss of empire and the unipolar state of the world in which the West defines the rules of the game (Lukyanov 2010; Oushakine 2009). One of the cardinal goals of the Putin regime has been to reestablish itself as a key node in the political arena and promote a diplomatic playing field where a number of great powers share in such definition (Chebankova 2017), Russia being one of them. One characteristic of this striving for multipolarity is the rearticulation of global power structures. At the same time, Russia's version of multipolarity is also imbued with civilizational discourses where it regards itself as one of the grand global civilizations (besides the Atlantic and Chinese counterparts). Being a "Eurasian" nation not only means that it has a historically legitimate position

in geopolitics but also that its normative understanding of democracy is justifiable (Turoma and Mjør 2020; Laruelle 2008).

Russia's involvement in Palmyra is at the same time an articulation of this multipolarity and a pawn in further ossifying and strengthening the position of Russia as a geopolitical player of importance. However, in 2016, Russia's status as an uncontested political heavyweight was threatened. Following the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, Russia has become increasingly isolated. Through active involvement in Syria, and recently in Libya and West Africa, Russia was able to (re)materialize geopolitical alignments and relations (Stent 2016; Zisser 2016). It was, then, not a surprise that the quarterly magazine of the Russian mission to UNESCO—a journal for Russian diplomats and UNESCO ambassadors—explicitly celebrated that many Western and global partners co-sponsored their 2016 proposal for involving UNESCO in the safeguarding and preservation of Palmyra (Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO 2016). The fact that most of

the BRICS (India, China, and South Africa) ambassadors to UNESCO participated in the concert in 2016 also was endlessly repeated, and those dignitaries were even called to give a press conference on site (Fig. 2). Palmyra was one of these many geopolitical instruments through which Russia has expanded and developed an international platform.

In many ways, publicly celebrating the excavations and restorations of Palmyra on the international stage is very similar to the colonial “Great Game” between the large empires in the Middle East and Inner Asia in the nineteenth century. By becoming embedded in defining the postconflict future of Palmyra, Russia engraves itself in the future negotiation of the region and thus maintains a strategic foothold on the global stage. Even if few international teams have become associated with the projects of the Russians, they remain the main actor gridlocking the site and Syria more widely. The world needs to reckon with Russia if it wants to do something in the region. As such, Russia has succeeded in its quest for multipolarity.



FIG. 2

Screenshot made by G. F. J. Plets from the improvised press conference during the Prayer for Palmyra event.

In front of the ruins of Palmyra, we see the envoys to UNESCO addressing the press. We can identify the ambassadors to UNESCO from Russia, South Africa, Peru, China, Algeria, Serbia, and the Philippines. For the full video of the Rossiya-24 news report from March 6, 2016, see: <https://smotrim.ru/video/2079799>.

Russia and Palmyra at Home: A Platform for Strengthening the Kremlin's Managed Democracy

The reconstruction efforts by Russian heritage institutions need to be understood through their transnational entanglements. However, we should not overstate the diplomatic intricacies of the Kremlin's involvement in Syrian archaeology. Although public diplomacy remains an important policy instrument in the management of foreign affairs, it is not as all-defining and comparable to the USSR's use of culture in international politics (Lebedeva 2020). Some have even argued that since 2012 Russia's attention to cultural diplomacy has stalled or even decreased (Ageeva 2021) while disinformation and "digital diplomacy" have become more central (Velikaya and Simons 2020; Tsvetkova 2020). It is therefore highly doubtful that the attention to Palmyra solely served diplomacy.

Russian scholars have similarly critiqued how Western scholars singularly foreground the international propaganda dimensions of Palmyra and ignore the domestic importance of Palmyra (Balaeva 2019; Karmov 2020). Palmyra has long been an important site in the Russian historical collective consciousness, significantly preceding the war in Syria. We agree with Karmov (2020) that the cultural significance of Palmyra has triggered Russian interest in the site. However, we disagree with the notion that the preexistence of grassroots connections with Palmyra discards all interpretations that see "the actions of the Russians in Palmyra as opportunistic . . . propaganda move[s] of the Russian government" (2020: 168). Rather, we argue that because of this deep connection with Palmyra, the ancient city served as an ideal instrument in the "culture war" of the Kremlin (Smyth 2014: 584–85). Using history, patriotic symbols, and anti-Western discourse, the Kremlin has been utilizing culture to strengthen Putin's position in the electoral authoritarian regime. This "culture war" has been exacerbated since the 2010s as dwindling oil prices started to threaten Putin's image as a good economic manager.

Strategic messaging in Russian language newspapers and signaling about the Russian reconstruction efforts in and of themselves already illustrate the Kremlin's

interest in Palmyra for Russian cultural policies. For example, the unwillingness of UNESCO and international teams to collaborate with Russia in Palmyra was strategically spun by official commentators into Western politicking and the West's disregard for the "heritage of humanity."¹⁷ The message to the Russian public was clear and straightforward; Russia stood all alone in the international community in its willingness to reconstruct the "cradle of civilization." Within various Russian-language press outlets, there are ample examples of strategic messaging about heritage reconstruction projects. These discourses ultimately served to strengthen the image of the regime at home. However, the case that best encapsulates the strategic instrumentalization of Palmyra for enacting regime support is the project Palmyra in Time and Space of the RGO. The strategic messaging of the RGO not only illustrates the types of discourses unleashed on Russian civil society. Also, because of the unique institutional organization of the RGO, this project shows how state institutions play a central role in defining the future of the site.

On August 11, 2017, Natalia Solovyeva, deputy director of the Institute of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences, received the prestigious Crystal Compass Award from the board of the RGO for her research project Palmyra in Time and Space. According to the jury consisting of politicians, oligarchs, and Nobel prize winners, the mere fact that she and her team put their lives in danger to document the destroyed site while sappers were still removing explosives made these archaeologists not only eligible for the prize but also "real patriots of Russia working in the fields of geographical science, environmental protection, [and] preservation of cultural heritage."¹⁸

Two years later the same team of archaeologists, together with other Crystal Compass Winners, starred in the Hollywoodesque film "Winners," co-produced by Gazprom and the RGO.¹⁹ In this sensationalist documentary the perils of the Palmyra in Time and Space project team were depicted, how they—while wearing bullet-proof vests and military-grade helmets—documented the entire site using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and were able to model the site in 3D just before Daesh retook it. During the presentation of the film, the board

of the RGO celebrated the scientists and their accomplishments and called them “the heroes of our time. Often they remain in the shadows but . . . make discoveries, introduce advanced technologies to improve the ecological situation on the planet, preserve the historical and cultural heritage of the homeland.”²⁰

The outreach of this project did not stop with a documentary and a swath of accessible and easily readable blog posts on the project website. The 2018–2019 poster exhibition “Monuments of Palmyra: History and Modern Times” presented the outcomes of the research project to the public and traveled across the Russian Federation.²¹ The information panels of the exhibition were strategically displayed on popular boulevards in large Russian

metropolises. Besides describing the heroic research of the Russian archaeologists, the displays also contrasted the current preservation with historic pictures of Palmyra taken during nineteenth-century expeditions of the RGO to Palmyra (Fig. 3).

The underlying message of the exhibition was clear: Russia has had a long love affair with Palmyra, and current preservation efforts fit in a long history of excavating the antique heritage of Western civilization in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Also in other publications this entanglement between Russian modern history and Palmyra was stressed. Although there was a broader interest in classics and Greco-Roman archaeology in imperial Russia, comparable to many



FIG. 3

Picture from the poster exhibition. In this panel, contemporary pictures from the 2016 RGO expedition are contrasted with photos from nineteenth-century RGO visits. (Source: RGO, July 17, 2019, <https://www.rgo.ru/ru/article/na-gogolevskom-bulvare-rabotaet-vystavka-pamyatniki-palmiry-istoriya-i-sovremennost>.)

other Western nations in the eighteenth–nineteenth century, there was a specific interest in the archaeology of the eastern Mediterranean. Already after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the princes of the Grand Dutchy of Moscow declared that their principality was the “Third Rome” and that they and not the Ottoman Empire were the true successor of the Byzantine Empire, and thus also of the Roman Empire. The first czars (etymologically connected to *Caesar*) used symbols and frameworks of the Roman Empire in their statecraft efforts and framed themselves and their empire as part of the long tradition of the Eastern Roman / Byzantine Empire.

This purported love affair between Russia and Palmyra had started during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796). Also at the Russian court, the fascination with Enlightenment philosophies and norms went hand in hand with a rediscovery of antiquity. In Russia, Palmyra played an important role in this engagement with classical heritage (Elcheikh 2022). In the mid-eighteenth century, an influential French enclave at the Russian court proclaimed Saint Petersburg to be the Palmyra of the north while Catherine the Great was compared to the legendary queen Zenobia, the third-century CE queen of the Palmyrene Empire (Rostovtzeff 1932: 122). This short-lived breakaway region in the eastern part of the Roman Empire had its capital in Palmyra and was an important prelude to the establishment of the Byzantine Empire (Stoneman 1992: 112). Historians of Catherine the Great’s court further deepened and institutionalized linkages with the Byzantine Empire to strengthen the state and legitimize the annexation of lands around the Black Sea and Crimea specifically (Wortman 2006).

In the nineteenth century, archaeology also started to play an important role in the Byzantification of the Russian Empire. Major excavations were organized in the Greek-Byzantine city of Chersonesos, Crimea, which was framed as the birthplace of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (Kozelsky 2004; Munawar and Symonds 2023). When at the end of the nineteenth century different expeditions were sent to present-day Syria in search of a location for an imperial archaeological excavation, Palmyra proved to hold enormous potential for the Russians (Üre 2014).

In the late nineteenth century, we see an enactment of this enlightened love affair through expeditions and excavations. In 1872 the first expeditions by Russian antiquarians of the RGO take place in Palmyra. Later in 1882 Abamelek-Lazarev, sponsored by the RGO, discovered the so-called Palmyra Tariff. A large marble slab from 137 BCE with inscriptions in different archaic Middle Eastern languages describing the Roman tax law of Palmyra and tariffs on goods (Gawlikowski 1994). This stone, particularly famous in Russia, is now the key showpiece of the Palmyra collection of the State Hermitage Museum, where it enjoys a status like the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum.²² The clear interest in Byzantine archaeology is also showcased by the early establishment of the Russian Archaeological Institute of Constantinople in 1895. The German and French institutes were only founded in 1929 and the British one in Ankara no earlier than 1947.

Following this discovery, Palmyra quickly became the trophy of Russian imperial archaeology, and multiple excavation seasons took place at the start of the twentieth century until the relationship with the Ottoman Empire deteriorated (Üre 2014). From the late 1950s onward, after the disintegration of French control over Syria, Polish archaeologist Michałowski, supported by the communist Polish government that had close ties to Syria’s al-Baath government (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013), took over Western projects, and the Polish Academy of Sciences became the central player in Palmyra until armed conflict started in Syria.

As argued by Üre, one of the main motivations for the early nineteenth- to twentieth-century expeditions was exhibiting “imperial prestige and Russian civilizational status” (2014: 196–97) at home and abroad. For the Russian state, which increasingly embraced the cornerstones of modernity and Western conceptions of Empire and nationalism from the mid-nineteenth century onward, these excavations were partially about competing with the Europeans in a region and sector where Western nations were. But, like other European nations, acquiring antique collections and displaying these in a rapidly growing imperial museum (Hermitage) was equally about cultivating national pride among the Russian population and normalizing the global power and position of the Russian emperor. Palmyra became to Russia what Pergamon was to the German Empire, a site

through which the prestige of the nation-state could be mediated.

However, in this quest for imperial prestige, Russia did not just want to mimic other Western European nations. Palmyra and the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire were not “just” classical sites, their connections with Asia were very relevant. As outlined above, the predominant focus on the eastern Roman Empire was partially a historical artifact, but it was also structured by ideological ambitions and domestic identity politics. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russia increasingly started to position itself as *Eurasian*, a juncture where the West and East meet—just as Palmyra was perceived to be. In this conception, alluded to earlier in this article, Russia is not one part of a broader European civilization but a distinct and separate civilization (Turoma, Rtilainen, and Trubina 2018). In Russian and Soviet history textbooks, the Byzantine Empire, with Palmyra as one of its major sites, embodies these Eurasian tropes (Fig. 4). According to M. Lipman (2015), symbols of the Byzantine Empire are still operationalized by the Kremlin in Russian public culture to discursively normalize Russia as Eurasian and not European.

When the West and NATO started to ramp up their actions against Syria’s government following the escalation of violence against civilians, and Polish archaeologists lost standing in Syria (Poland is a member of NATO and deployed F16s to the Middle East), archaeologists of the Hermitage/Palmyra section and the Russian Academy of Sciences were keen to continue this long love affair and take over the concession of Palmyra. Already in the spring of 2015, a delegation headed by the same, above-mentioned, Natalia Solovyeva set up talks with Damascus to start excavations in Palmyra, but the first excavation season was canceled due to the ultimate takeover of the site by Daesh.²³ This eagerness to work in Palmyra a century and a half ago and today is not only the outcome of a special liking for the archaeology of the eastern part of the Roman Empire and Byzantine symbols or (today) of familiarity with the archaeology of the region. The strong discursive similarities in both the popular media and exhibitions for the Russian public, in how contemporary research in Palmyra is framed as a civilizational and patriotic project, and the continuous references to the first imperial excavations, signal that

similar geopolitical *and* domestic political ambitions and agendas underlie the recent obsession with Palmyra.

That the RGO funds this Palmyra research and keenly floods the Russian media with the heroic accomplishments of Russian scientists should not come as a surprise. Just like the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Hermitage, the RGO’s roots are in the imperial period. Founded in 1845 and largely based on French and British imperial geographic societies, the RGO played an important role in the exploration of Siberia, the Far East, and Central Asia. It was specifically founded to provide the state with the geographic and ethnological information necessary for the colonization of the Eurasian heartland (Bassin 1983). After losing much of its relevance during the early 1990s, in 2009 the mothballed society

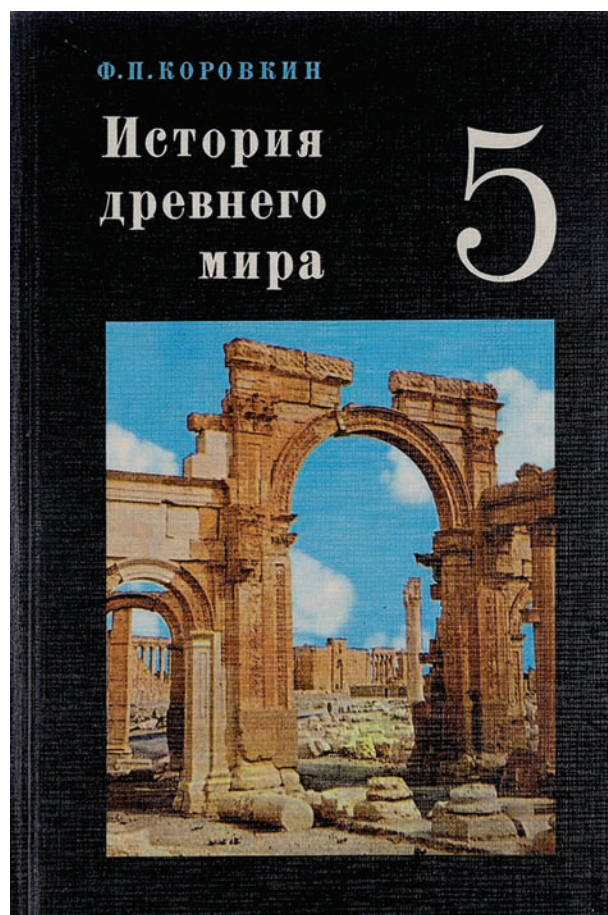


FIG. 4
The monumental arch of Palmyra adorns Korovkin’s 1984 grade 5 Soviet history textbook.

was reactivated again by Vladimir Putin. Today he is the chairman of the RGO, which consists of an impressive management comprising 25 oligarchs, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prince of Monaco, and the president of British Petroleum. All these wealthy and influential representatives also financially contribute to the society, enabling it to maintain an equally impressive grant system.

When Sergey Shoigu, the current Russian minister of defense, became the society's president, the RGO found its second breath and rapidly became one of the most important players in Russian science. In its revamped form it became less focused on continuing Tsarist agendas aimed at gaining a better idea of the geography and indigenous groups of Siberia and the Arctic. Rather, the new agenda of the society was built around patriotism and expanding regime legitimacy. As noted by its leadership, through enabling research and good communication about the world-class research by Russian scientists, the RGO ambitions to "help people to discover Russia . . . and inspire love" for the country (Radvanyi 2017). The impressive list of projects funded by the RGO includes a variety of disciplines, but both archaeology and geography receive the most attention. Of the eight "flagship" expeditions, major international projects receiving both financial and logistic support of the army, five are archaeological projects.

The first liberation of Palmyra in March 2016 might have received international attention, but in the international media archaeological work on the site received only occasional attention. However, in domestic Russian government-controlled news outlets Palmyra was a key discussion point. Since the 2016 liberation, 32 lengthy articles or news items about the work on the heritage site were published by RIA Novosti alone. In these reports, the civilizational work of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Hermitage received a lot of attention and was lauded explicitly. At the same time, international inaction was strongly refuted and portrayed as "political games of the West."

This instantiation of Russia as a beacon of stability in an extremely turbulent and volatile geopolitical environment is a deliberate tactic used by the Kremlin since the Soviet Union to convince Russian citizens to surrender

political agency and freedom to the central state. Various scholars agree that this "besieged fortress" mentality, which was already actively built up by Lenin and Stalin, had become an important doctrine in Putin's second term and has expanded even more during the Medvedev years and Putin's third term (Makarin and Oppenheimer 2001). In this model, Russia and its people are depicted as the only nation "doing the right thing" despite being surrounded by foreign elements that want to undermine the nation. Because the "enemy is at the gates," staying united behind the president and the national metanarratives is crucial for the survival of the nation, even if this means people must surrender important civil rights. In the end, in this model not only the regime is being strengthened, also a political culture in which the people have little power is normalized.

In the reporting about Russian efforts to renovate and reconstruct Palmyra, this doctrine is furthered in both the media and in the outlets of the RGO. First, the image is being constructed that the Russian people have good intentions and that the Russian state merely protects the interests of its people. The reconstruction projects in Syria are not being depicted as directly orchestrated by the state but rather as actions by Russian scientists and the cultural elite. Rarely do politicians such as Putin or his minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, comment on Palmyra or Syrian heritage; rather, experts such as Piotrovsky and Solovyeva operate as the key spokespersons addressing the plans to reconstruct Palmyra. This creates the impression that not the Russian state but the Russian academic community, and thus Russian civil society, means well and is committed to safeguarding the heritage of "humanity." Second, by continuously commenting on the inaction of the international community the image is furthered that the will of the Russian people is undermined by outsiders.

A decrease in oil and gas money and a low ruble since the economic crisis of 2008 undermined the economic power of the regime. The contested reelection of Putin in 2012 triggered widespread protests and was a clear signal to the Kremlin that an alternative to the "social contract" of the 2000s, when regime support was traded for welfare benefits, needed to be found (Sakwa 2014; Gel'man 2015). Increasingly culture became central in

instilling a mode of cultural citizenship where ordinary Russians have limited power and political agency. The RGO was redesigned to further this policy. We argue that Palmyra was one of the many symbols used to direct the conduct of ordinary Russians, encourage patriotism, and normalize a conservative and managed political culture. The discourse around the reconstruction of Palmyra also reproduces the political imaginaries of the Kremlin, legitimizing existing political structures as a mere necessity in the face of Western aggressions while at the same time normalizing foreign intervention.

Conclusion

Russian engagements with the heritage of Palmyra are defined by both foreign and domestic policy interests. By defining the postconflict future of the “pearl of the desert,” the Kremlin attempts to materialize diplomatic goals. The site especially became an interesting symbol following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the aftermath of the annexation, Russia lost its standing abroad both with other international players and foreign publics. Palmyra should thus be framed as part of a broader public diplomacy effort to raise the profile of the Russian state as the savior of civilization and culture. At the same time, the site also proved an interesting vehicle to bring Syria back to the international arena; albeit only a few international partners to date participated with the Syrian DGAM and Russia in the reconstruction of Palmyra. Lastly, the reconstruction projects also frame a larger quest for multipolarity. The site is both an outcome and instrument in the mediation of a global arena

in which Russia is an important political player that cannot be ignored in any geopolitical development.

The fact that there are diplomatic processes and agendas at play does not mean that Russian involvement is singularly the outcome of diplomatic opportunism. For over a century and a half, Russian society and Palmyra have had a shared cultural history. Palmyra was one of the sites through which the Russian Empire rediscovered itself as a modern society. This nineteenth-century interest in Palmyra goes deeper in time and can be tied to the notion that Moscow is the “Third Rome,” the successor to the eastern Roman Empire. These deep colonial-historical ties to Palmyra mainly explain the fascination with and investments in Palmyra. However, this long, shared history does not mean that the interest in Palmyra is apolitical. By exploring a project of the RGO, we have pointed to how the site is used by the Kremlin to further domestic cultural policies geared at ensuring regime stability.

Notes

1. UNESCO, Summary Records of the Executive Board 199th Session, April 4–15, 2016, UNESDOC Digital Library, July 15, 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245307>; UNESCO, UNESCO’s Role in Safeguarding and Preserving Palmyra and other Syrian World Heritage Sites, UNESDOC Digital Library, April 8, 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244379/PDF/244379eng.pdf.multi>.
2. Russia’s Hermitage Museum, UNESCO Agree to Safeguard Cultural Valuables in War Zones, TASS, October 9, 2017, <https://tass.com/society/969700>.
3. Both in news outlets and during the speeches at the Prayer for Palmyra concert a language rich in civilizational signifiers was used.
4. Sophia Kishovsky, “This Is Living Antiquity”: The Director of the Hermitage Wants to Rebuild Palmyra, *Art Newspaper*,

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5. Russia to Hand 3D Model of Palmyra to Syria at St. Petersburg Cultural Forum, TASS, October 30, 2017, <https://tass.com/society/973185>; Russia Gives Unique 3D Palmyra Model to Syria to Help Restore Ancient City, SANA, November 19, 2017, <https://sanasyria.org/en/?p=118574>.
 6. 3D Model of Ancient Palmyra Is Now Available Online for Everyone, Russian Geographical Society, September 3, 2020, <https://www.rgo.ru/en/article/3d-model-ancient-palmyra-now-available-online-everyone>.
 7. Russia Gives Unique 3D Palmyra Model to Syria to Help Restore Ancient City, SANA, November 19, 2017, <https://sanasyria.org/en/?p=118574>.
 8. РГО примет участие в восстановлении знаменитой арки в Пальмире., Russian Geographical Society, December 28, 2021, <https://www.rgo.ru/ru/article/rgo-primet-uchastie-v-vosstanovlenii-znamenitoy-arki-v-palmire>.
 9. مذكرة تفاهم روسية سورية لترميم بعض آثار مدينة تدمر التاريخية., El-Watan News, November 25, 2019, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/4441114>; M. Hardan, Russia Gains Foothold in Syria's Palmyra through Archaeological Restoration, Al-Monitor, June 21, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/russia-gains-foothold-syrias-palmyra-through-archaeological-restoration#ixzz72nfozotK>.
 10. خبراء الآثار الروس والسوريين يبدؤون بإعادة إعمار قوس النصر -خبراء الآثار الروس والسوريين-التدمري... فيديو وصور يبدؤون بإعادة إعمار قوس النصر-التدمري-فيديو-صور 1069245020.html. All translations into English are by the authors.
 11. مدير الآثار السورية يكشف أسباب عدم ترميم معالم تدمر الأثرية ويعلن عن 3 اتفاقيات مع روسيا -مدير الآثار السورية-يكشف أسباب عدم ترميم معالم تدمر الأثرية ويعلن عن 3 اتفاقيات مع روسيا-باب-عدم-ترميم-آثار-تدمر-ويعلن-عن-3-اتفاقيات-مع-روسيا-1048276346.html.
 12. خبراء الآثار الروس والسوريين يبدؤون بإعادة إعمار قوس النصر -خبراء الآثار الروس والسوريين-التدمري... فيديو وصور يبدؤون بإعادة إعمار قوس النصر-التدمري-فيديو-صور 69245020.html.
 13. For the speeches of Putin and Gergiev during the event see: A Prayer for Palmyra—Valery Gergijew's Symphony Concert for the Liberated Oasis City of Complex Terra, video, 1:59:45, accessed November 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrg6vRQ6X94&t=867s>.
 14. UNESCO, Summary Records of the Executive Board 199th Session, April 4–15, 2016, UNESDOC Digital Library, July 15, 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245307>.
 15. State Hermitage Museum, Memorandum of Understanding between the State Hermitage Museum and UNESCO on the Protection and Restoration of Cultural Treasures in Conflict Zones, October 9, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/quysbckm>.
 16. Hermitage Museum Director Calls for Global Effort to Reconstruct Syria's Palmyra, TASS, November 8, 2018, <https://tass.com/society/1029828>.
 17. A suite of articles in Russian newspapers lament the inaction of the West in Palmyra and link it to the ongoing corruption and erosion of Western culture, thus highlighting Russia as the one who is staying true to civilizational ideals and morality. For examples of such commentary, see Эксперт: Пальмира для многих западных бюрократов стала "словом токсичным," Radio Sputnik, July 9, 2018, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20180709/1524228569.html>; Запад не стремится помогать с восстановлением Пальмиры, заявили в Совфеде, RIA Novosti, July 9, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180709/1524214492.html>; Эксперт оценил усилия России и Сирии по восстановлению памятников Пальмиры, RIA Novosti, September 19, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190919/1558832910.html>.
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 23. Russian Archaeologists Eyeing Excavations in Palmyra after Restoration of Tadmor, TASS, June 9, 2018, <https://tass.com/science/1008849>.

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