Since the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East, critiques from anthropology and archaeology have focused on the many deliberate destructions of cultural heritage in the region. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research on (world) heritage politics in the Russian Federation, this talk will highlight the strategic manipulation of Palmyra by the Russian Federation and investigate how post-conflict conservation and reconstruction are also important political episodes in a heritage object's cultural biography. By comparing the recent use of Syria’s war-torn heritage with other post-conflict settings (Cambodia, Afghanistan and Mali), this talk will deconstruct the myriad of discourses, agendas and actors connected to Russia’s recent interest in ‘heritage diplomacy’ and use of archaeology as a technology of rule.

Ultimately, by drawing parallels with developments in Crimea where archaeological excavations are also at the crux of cultural politics, this talk will illustrate that the manipulation of culture are both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power tools.

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