

Civilization Returns to Palmyra — While the West Scoffs

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Global Research, May 08, 2016

[Russian Insider](#) 8 May 2016

In this essay we will examine the remarkable performance of the Mariinsky Theater orchestra in Palmyra on 5 May from three perspectives: at face value, in terms of the objectives set out by its organizer, with mention of all key actors; its political dimension as seen from Moscow; and its political dimension as seen by Western mainstream media

Even those with a limited knowledge of Russia may be credited with having heard of St Petersburg being called the Venice of the North. This is a title it must share with a variety of other claimants famed for their canals, such as Bruges in Belgium, although St Petersburg has more justification than competing cities given its common architectural roots with the Venice of the South, namely the leading 18th century Italian architects who contributed greatly to forming its appearance.

To *cognoscenti* there is also another twin city association of St Petersburg, that of the Northern Palmyra. That notion goes back to the age of Catherine the Great, who was likened to the 3rd century queen Zenobia, the powerful ruler of the Palmyran Empire who conquered Egypt and a large swathe of Anatolia. In the time of Pushkin, Russian writers further developed the allusion, drawing more generally upon the reputed beauty and cultural richness of Roman Palmyra.



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The links of consciousness did not end there. Later in the 19th century, St Petersburg based archeologists were among the Europeans taking part in digs in Palmyra and writing about their adventures.

With this twin city awareness borne by the Russian Intelligentsia to this day, it is not so surprising that precisely a St Petersburg conductor, Valeri Gergiev, thought up the grand gesture, an act of great imagination that was realized on Thursday, 5 May. He brought the Symphony Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theater to Palmyra to perform a concert of Bach, Shchedrin and Prokofiev in the Roman Amphitheater and to celebrate the return of culture

to a UNESCO site desecrated by its Islamic State occupiers who over the preceding year held their brutal public executions here. The concert audience consisted of Russian and Syrian troops, Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, noted Arabist and Director of the Hermitage Museum Mikhail Piotrovsky, local dignitaries, and a contingent of UNESCO representatives.

The event opened with a short speech by Vladimir Putin carried over a live satellite link from his residence in Sochi. Putin underscored the courage of those participating in the concert and the will of civilized society to triumph over terror. The entire event was broadcast live on Russian state television and [has been made available on the web by RT](#).

As the recording makes clear, this was a world-class performance that featured eminent soloists. The unaccompanied Bach piece for violin was played by a laureate of the International Tchaikovsky Competition, Pavel Miliukov. *Quadrille*, a work by the Mariinsky's house composer Rodion Shchedrin, widower of ballet prima donna Maya Plisetskaya, was performed by cellist Sergei Roldugin. And the choice of a Prokofiev symphony was in line with Gergiev's long-standing efforts to make that great Soviet composer widely known and appreciated at home and abroad.

It is little more than a month since Palmyra was liberated from its ISIS occupiers by the Syrian Army with the assistance of Russian air strikes. It is just days since the archeological sites were cleared of mines by Russian military specialists, many of whom were in the audience. Meanwhile, the forces of the Islamic State continue to send missions against Palmyra and its surrounding countryside in attempts to recapture lost ground.

In these circumstances, the action of maestro Gergiev, his orchestra and soloists, the logistics team that moved the orchestra and some 100 tons of telecommunications gear into the war zone, and the broadcasting team who set up the live coverage must be characterized as brave, even daring.

It was also in character for Gergiev. He performed at the front before, as he famously did in 2008 when he brought the orchestra to the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, just after its liberation from Georgian attackers. But he and his orchestra also perform at home in ways that show similar disregard for their own comfort and incur heightened risks: they regularly bring their music to hard to reach parts of the Russian Federation on grueling tours of the far north and the far east, often taking with them internationally known soloists. Those concerts do not receive the admiring attention of the outside world.

It bears mention that the concert by maestro Gergiev and the Mariinsky orchestra was not a one-off event. It was meant to be the first step in the return of culture and decency to Palmyra. Already on the next day a follow-on concert featuring a Syrian orchestra and chorus was held in the Roman amphitheater. Moreover, the Russians did not rush to evacuate their broadcasters and gear, because state television carried a live transmission of this evening concert to Russian viewers late last night.

With all due respect to maestro Gergiev's intention to present a gift of culture to the residents of Syria's UNESCO listed city of Palmyra and to convey the promise of return to normal civilian life in a country devastated by civil war and the intervention of foreign fighters, it would be disingenuous to ignore the way the Kremlin and its state television framed the event for consumption in Russia and the wider world. Call it an exercise in Soft

Power, of which it was surely Russia's most successful in many, many years; call it what you will, the concert in Palmyra had a clearly stated political dimension.

This 'Pray for Palmyra' concert was dedicated to the memory of two heroes, one Syrian, the other Russian. Large photos of both were on either side of the stage.

The Syrian being honored was Dr. Khaled Asaad, director of the Palmyra museum complex, who in August 2015, at age 81, was brutally executed, beheaded by the Islamic State militants. The presence at the concert of Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky was a direct counterpoint to the missing Syrian scholar and administrator. Piotrovsky symbolized the ongoing and future participation of Russian art restorers in bringing Palmyra back to its pre-war status as a center of research for orientalists and a major tourist attraction.

The Russian being honored was Lieutenant Alexander Prokhorenko, Russia's national hero of the Syrian campaign, the special forces officer working behind enemy lines on the Palmyra front who, when surrounded by jihadists, called in Russian jet strikes on his own position and knowingly paid with his life while taking out an enemy detachment. Prokhorenko's body was eventually recovered and returned to Russia this week where it was given the highest state honors. His funeral in his native Orenburg region was held yesterday, on 6 May. Russian television news coverage of the Palmyra concert was back-to-back with video reportage of the honor guard receiving Prokhorenko's coffin. Moreover, attention was given to Western resonance of his valor.

Though some British newspapers had described Prokhorenko as a Russian "Rambo" and some Western military experts saluted the selfless heroism of this fellow professional, Russian state television chose to feature a more personal response. We were shown an elderly French couple who had sent their family medals for World War II resistance heroism to the parents of Prokhorenko via the Russian diplomatic service as their expression of solidarity. The couple was invited to Russia by President Putin and met with the grieving parents of Russia's hero, as we saw on television.

More broadly, the date for the Mariinsky concert in Palmyra was surely chosen with an eye to the forthcoming 9 May Victory in Europe celebrations across Russia. The concert was a gift to the Russian nation for its popular if skeptical support of the military intervention in Syria. They saw on their screens the fruits of Russian-Syrian military cooperation, and in particular images of the secular and friendly Syria that Russian diplomacy has backed with blood and national wealth.

They saw the first step in what will be a long process of reconstruction, preparing the way for the return of refugees and displaced persons. All of this is a direct reproach to the European Union's handling of the migrant crisis, namely ransacking the first aid station for band-aids rather than identifying and addressing the root causes of the problem. Europe, like the United States, has at best stood by and at worst aided and abetted interventions in the Syrian civil war by the Gulf States and Turkey that greatly strengthened the terrorist forces and prolonged the fighting awaiting the collapse of the Assad regime, notwithstanding all the havoc that resulted for the Syrian population.

Western mainstream media coverage of the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra's concert in Palmyra runs the full range from merely tendentious and sour grapes to overtly hostile and malicious commentary.

U.S. media coverage was meager. The online edition of *Time* magazine was short, concentrated on the facts and avoided politically colored adjectives. To its credit, we are told that the concert was led “by renowned Russian conductor Valery Gergiev.” The presence in the audience of UNESCO dignitaries was noted.

The New York Times was less cautious, more inflammatory. Its editors chose a headline that make clear the intention to deprive the event of any serious merit: “Russian Orchestra Plays in Palmyra Ruins as Strikes Kill 28.” This linkage of two separate news items may be described as the “Washington narrative” because it shows up in many other derogatory press accounts of the concert. Just how far that could be pushed we will see in a minute when we consider the BBC’s coverage.

What shred of journalistic integrity the *NYT* managed to produce appears at the very end of the article, when the author admits that: “it was not immediately clear who carried out the attack on the camp in Idlib province where some 2,000 internally displaced people had taken shelter from the fighting in nearby Aleppo and Hama provinces over the past year.” And the closing words are that it is ‘too early to say if Assad’s forces carried out the attack.’ But the intended damage to the credibility of the Russian cultural mission to Palmyra was already done up front.

Probably the most toxic U.S. reporting on the concert was from Radio Svoboda, the old Cold War bullhorn directed against Russia with U.S. government funding. Here at the outset we are told about the cellist Roldugin, the “close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin” who was caught out in the Panama Papers scandal as the owner of an offshore company engaged in “shady transactions.” But then the article switches over entirely to a story broadcast by Sky News two days earlier alleging that Palmyra was handed over to Syrian government troops by the Islamic State in accordance with agreements reached between IS and the Assad regime. Assad was supposedly in cahoots with the jihadists. The notion of Russian participation in the city’s liberation is off the radar screen of the Radio Svoboda propagandists.

British media were more attentive to the concert in Palmyra but, with one or two exceptions, no more friendly than their American *confrères*. *The Guardian*, which is sometimes independent-minded on Russian affairs, this time was entirely aligned with the Washington narrative. Valery Gergiev is presented as the “Kremlin favourite.” Moreover, we read that “Gergiev, the former principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, is a controversial and outspoken supporter of Putin.” In this light, we are reminded about Gergiev’s 2008 concert in Ossetia. I note parenthetically what *The Guardian* omitted in their rush to marginalize the maestro: that Gergiev is now the principal conductor of the Munich Philharmonic as well as artistic director of the Mariinsky.

The Guardian also reminds us that featured cellist Sergei Roldugin is “Vladimir Putin’s best friend” and that “the Panama Papers revealed that Roldugin was the beneficiary of hundreds of millions of dollars in offshore deals.”

Finally, *The Guardian* tells its readers that among the foreigners present at the concert were representatives from Zimbabwe, China and Serbia. They pointedly omit to say that they were present in a UNESCO delegation which also included Europeans.

The BBC online coverage carries many of the anti-Putin, anti-Russian tendentious adjectives, reminders and omissions that we have seen above. But it goes the extra mile by quoting UK

Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond's extraordinary comment that the concert was "a tasteless attempt to distract attention from the continued suffering of millions of Syrians. It shows that there are no depths to which the regime will not sink." From the BBC quote, it is not clear whether the Minister had in mind the Putin or the Assad regime's plumbing the depths. But, in any case, his intention to slander the Russians is obvious.

To their credit, the BBC also carried a more balanced separate report from their bureau chief in Moscow, Steve Rosenberg. He saw that the message from Moscow was that Russia is a force for good, whereas Western officials "remain suspicious of Russia's intentions." Otherwise, Rosenberg just repeats the same hurtful innuendos that we have seen above: the connection between Rodulgin and the Panama Papers, the Gergiev concert in Tskhinvali in 2008.

To every generalization there is always an exception, and as happens from time to time it is the British tabloids that show more common sense and decency than the high style outlets of the political class. The heading given to the article on the concert of 5 May in the online edition of *The Daily Mail* says it all: "Culture and civilization return to Palmyra: Russian orchestra performs concert in the ancient Roman amphitheatre for the first time since ISIS used it to carry out public executions in Syria. The editors wisely included a click-on video recording of the concert, allowing their readers to judge for themselves.

In summary, the Information War that the West has been waging against Russia is going full tilt. It is an unpardonable error of judgment to speak of a new Cold War as something that lies ahead, just around the corner. We are in the midst of it, and it will take enormous luck or a change of leaders for the better if we are to avoid a hot war.

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