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Russia Turns to Cats In Palmyra Restoration Effort - Exclusive

By The Moscow Times

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A specially trained group of cats from St. Petersburg's Hermitage museum will help in restoring Palmyra, The Moscow Times can reveal.

Devastated by nearly a year's worth of fighting between Islamic State (a terrorist organisation banned in Russia) and regime forces, the ancient city was re-taken on Sunday 27 March.

Russia's leading cultural organisations said they would step up to assist the restoration effort. But few commentators expected such an unusual intervention.

Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage museum, told The Moscow Times that deploying the cats was part of the museum's contribution to world heritage.

"We know that cats can do amazing things given the right training — they can smell out landmines and use their whiskers to remove topsoil," Piotrovsky told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Thursday. "More importantly, our cats know art and they know how crucial it

is to treat treasures like Palmyra gently."

Hermitage cats have been living in the museum basements for decades, and were used primarily to catch mice that might pose danger for stored paintings. A source close to Russia's Defense Ministry told The Moscow Times that the Hermitage cats might now be sent to eliminate surveillance mice the Islamic State have reportedly deployed to Palmyra.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, the source said that military planners understand the Islamists have created their own special rodent battalion — MISIS (also banned in Russia).

"Everyone thought [vice prime minister Dmitry] Rogozin was joking about the U.S. sending mice to spy on Russian military developments, but in fact he wasn't far off the truth. MISIS are spying on us, and we're going to deal with it, thanks to Mr. Piotrovsky's generosity," the source said.

Another source familiar with the situation said the cats underwent secret training in a Russian monastery.

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