The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin: The New Tsar

A new documentary worth watching

By Mark H. Teeter

March 15, 2018



Scene from new BBC documentary on the life and deeds of Vladimir Putin. **YouTube**

Its already-clichéd title epithet aside, this new BBC documentary represents an excellent educated/PG audience summary of Vladimir Putin and how he got to be the man he is — and watching it now is an appropriate warm-up to the Putin re-election down whose barrel Russians are looking.

Director Patrick Forbes assembled a remarkable cast of politicians and participant-witnesses, Russian and non-Russian, and the narrative moves the viewer through this complex period of modern history crisply and coherently, thanks in large measure to a wealth of memorable anecdotes and a voice-over that recounts the basics without sounding melodramatic or accusatory. This is no small accomplishment given the Us vs. Them toxicity of the media environment we now inhabit, and a hearty bravo should go to Forbes, his principals and the BBC itself for a job well done.

Embed:

There are lapses here and there, inevitably: too much is made, for one thing, of the president's alleged "popular support" at several junctures; and too little is made, for another, of today's opposition spectrum (Sobchak gets considerable footage, Navalny none). There are also occasional moments when the expert testimony wants questioning, such as former British Foreign Minister Jack Straw's regretful suggestion that supposed Western-created "anxieties" helped lead Putin to break as bad as he did. Please. Whatever anxieties were involved were something a leader should surmount; this one didn't. Beyond that, let's leave shrinking to shrinks.

And fortunately, this documentary has a very good one: Scottish clinical psychologist Ian Robertson (Trinity College Dublin), who appears several times to offer telling analyses of a human psyche whose host brainpan has been moved from an environment of extreme poverty and incapacity to one of wealth and dominion. What's Robertson's take on the singular arc of subject Vladimir Putin? Hint: recall Lord Acton's take on absolute power.

Documentaries like this one, done in measured tones and dispassionate manner, are particularly valuable today amid the cacophony of high-volume, low-coherence journalism practiced inside Russia and out. The fact that only a modest percentage of the Russian viewing public will see this "Putin" — a self-selected elite of politically-attuned, Internet-savvy and English-speaking citizens — is no particular cause for concern, if you consider that these are likely to be the cadres who make the most difference when Russia, some time after 2024, returns to and resumes the recovery process begun in 1991.

Briefly put, this is a documentary very much worth tracking down and talking up. If the message of the ruling United Russia party before the voting Sunday can summed up in the Orwellian campaign slogan "Russia is Putin. Without Putin there is no Russia," then the take-away from this BBC "Putin" may be that one can revealingly document the route by which Russia reached this discouraging point — and that this process itself may serve as a step on the road away from it.

OxfordFilms/BBC2(UK, 2018) 59 min.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/03/15/putin-the-new-tsar-a60822