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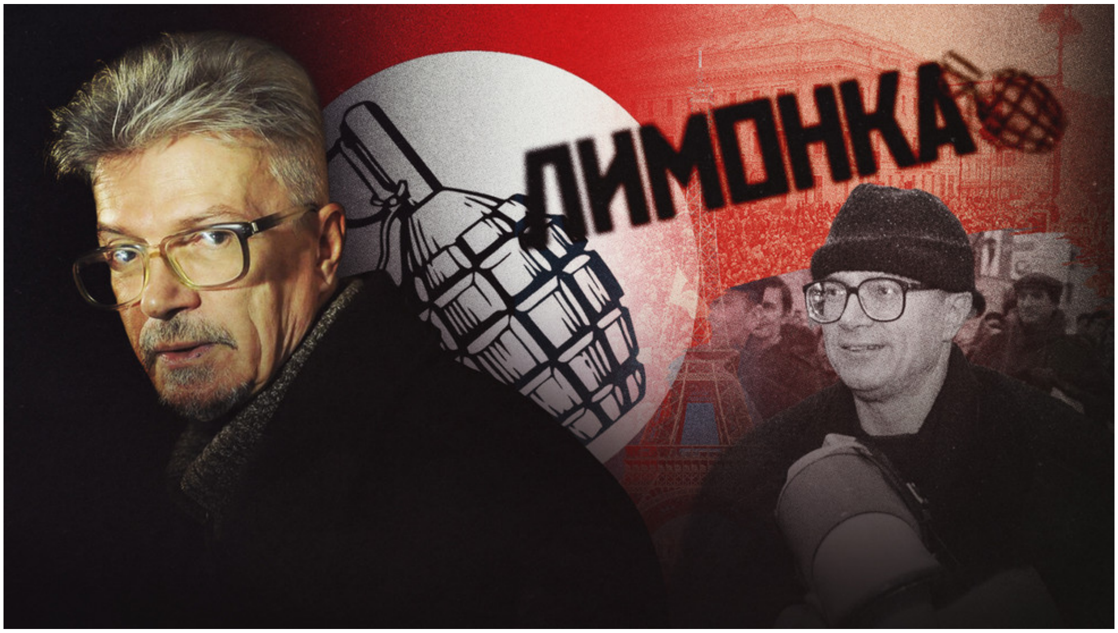
# ‘Russia’s last great writer’: The scandalous story of Eduard Limonov – exiled by the KGB, before he shocked post-Soviet Moscow

## The convinced revolutionary, and literary icon – who grew up in Ukraine – was born 80 years ago



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An enfant terrible, and a lifelong teenager, who became Russia’s "last great writer;" an emigrant and a patriot; a bohemian and an uncompromising revolutionary with the spirit of a field commander; a politician ideologically tied both to the government and the opposition, yet an irreconcilable enemy of both; a sensual and tender man full of primordial rage and hatred for the living and the dead – any attempt to describe Eduard Limonov inevitably boils down to contradictory opinions expressed by his contemporaries, fans, friends, and foes.

Throughout his 77-year life and until his death in March 2020, Limonov never stopped being a source of controversy and contradiction. He was an outsider in the Soviet system, but not a dissident. Abroad, he was not accepted by the emigrant circles and considered pro-Moscow.

In the new Russia, which replaced the USSR, the authorities persecuted Limonov the politician: His party was banned, and he was imprisoned. The opposition also steered clear of him, considering his views too radical and imperialist. And even his books, indisputable from the point of view of artistic merit, cause a mix of conflicting emotions in readers, ranging from admiration to disgust.

Describing his love affairs (until his final days, Limonov sought out the company of young, exceptional women), the writer often joked, *"But they're not sleeping with me – they're sleeping with history."* And though he was said to be an incurable narcissist, his words ring true. Limonov's entire life was indeed a fascinating journey through some of the most ambiguous pages of Russian and world history.

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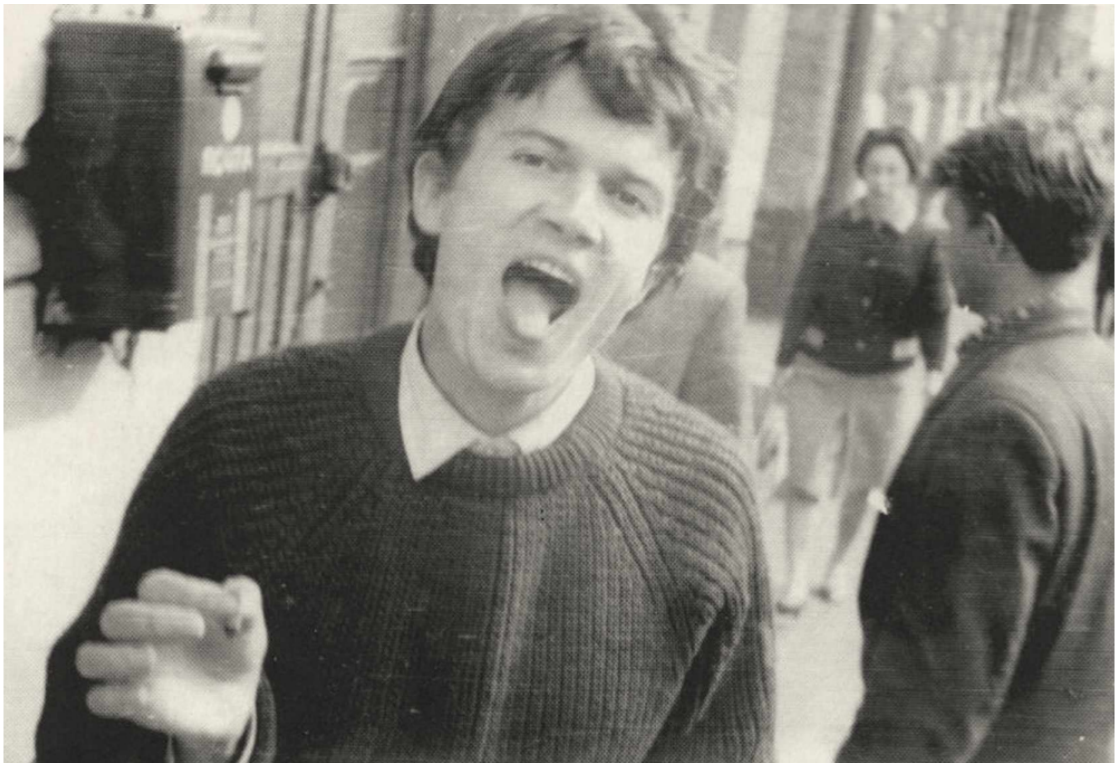
## Limonov the exile

Eduard Savenko (Limonov's real name) was born 80 years ago in the family of a provincial serviceman in the city of Dzerzhinsk in what is now the Nizhny Novgorod region. When Eduard was about three years old, the family moved to Kharkov – where, less than a year ago, the Armed Forces of Russia and Ukraine were engaged in fierce battle on its outskirts. Limonov grew up in the East Ukrainian city. There, he took his first steps in life and wrote his first poems. For the rest of his life, he considered it his hometown.

> ***"Kharkov — home, Ukraine — down"***

was one of Limonov's favorite slogans. He always considered Kharkov a "great Russian city," that has been "under occupation" since the collapse of the USSR.



A photo from the book 'Limonov in photos'. 'I'm 21. The poet (again). I'm standing at the 'Lux' restaurant on Sumskaya Street.'

In Soviet times no one questioned Kharkov's status. Savenko was free to live between two cities, going back and forth between Ukraine's first capital and Moscow until he finally decided to settle in the latter. In Moscow, Eduard Savenko picked up the pseudonym "Limonov." Being a proletarian and a punk from head to toe, he lived the bohemian lifestyle. Limonov was friends with poets and diplomats, and published his own collections of poetry. However, this idyllic existence did not last long – in the mid-'70s Limonov and his wife Elena Shchapova were exiled from the USSR.

*"Neither of us ever considered emigration. We were simply kicked out, and no one asked for our consent. The KGB tried to force Limonov to work for them, and naturally, he refused. The price for the refusal was our exile,"* Shchapova later recalled.

After briefly wandering around Europe, Limonov and his wife finally received US visas. The Big Apple symbolized their entire hope for the future. However, these dreams were not meant to come true.

The couple lived on the verge of poverty – Limonov's work didn't fare better in the US than in the USSR. Meanwhile, his irritation and frustration grew. Unlike most Soviet emigrants, who fell in love with Western capitalism, Limonov wrote

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impassioned opinion pieces in America's Russian-language publications and lashed out at consumer society. As a result of his fervent criticism of capitalism and nostalgia for the Soviet past, Limonov was 'canceled' in the emigrant press and deprived of his last source of income.

Limonov's wife left him. The poet sank all the way down to the bottom of the social ladder. But these trials only made him stronger and provided the author with material for the best-selling books that would turn him into a legend during his lifetime.

A photo from the book 'Limonov in photos'. 'Eddie. Author and hero. Spring of the 1976. The novel hasn't been written yet. Elena has already left. Photo by Lyonka Lubyanitsky.'

## Limonov the writer

Abandoned by the person closest to him, his wife, Limonov became an ordinary immigrant in New York's melting pot. As a writer, he masterfully used his intuition to take this theme beyond the confines of personal drama and turned it into a clash of political and class issues. His autobiographical hero's beloved is seduced by the rich and prosperous American bourgeoisie that easily tricks naive Russians with its promises of freedom and prosperity.

Limonov's desperate hero plunges into the world of drugs and sexual promiscuity, including same-sex relationships. However, Limonov doesn't portray this in the light of Beatnik-like views – as a liberating lifestyle, but rather in the spirit of Dostoevsky – as a fall into the circles of hell. As a result, his first novel, 'It's Me, Eddie,' became a modern Russian classic, a heartbreaking, pornographic, and yet conservative text about love.

No US publisher would touch the scandalous novel. Limonov was able to publish it only in France, where he moved in 1980. It became an overnight success – Limonov achieved worldwide fame, was highly rated by readers and critics alike, and his book was translated into dozens of languages. Spurred on by the success, Limonov continued relating his New York misadventures in new works. In the novel 'His Butler's Story', Limonov recounted his experience of serving in the house of a very rich American (specifically, billionaire Peter Sprague); and in the novel 'The Diary of a Loser, or a Secret Notebook' Limonov talks about struggling with a system that is totally alien to him and his desire for a global revolution.

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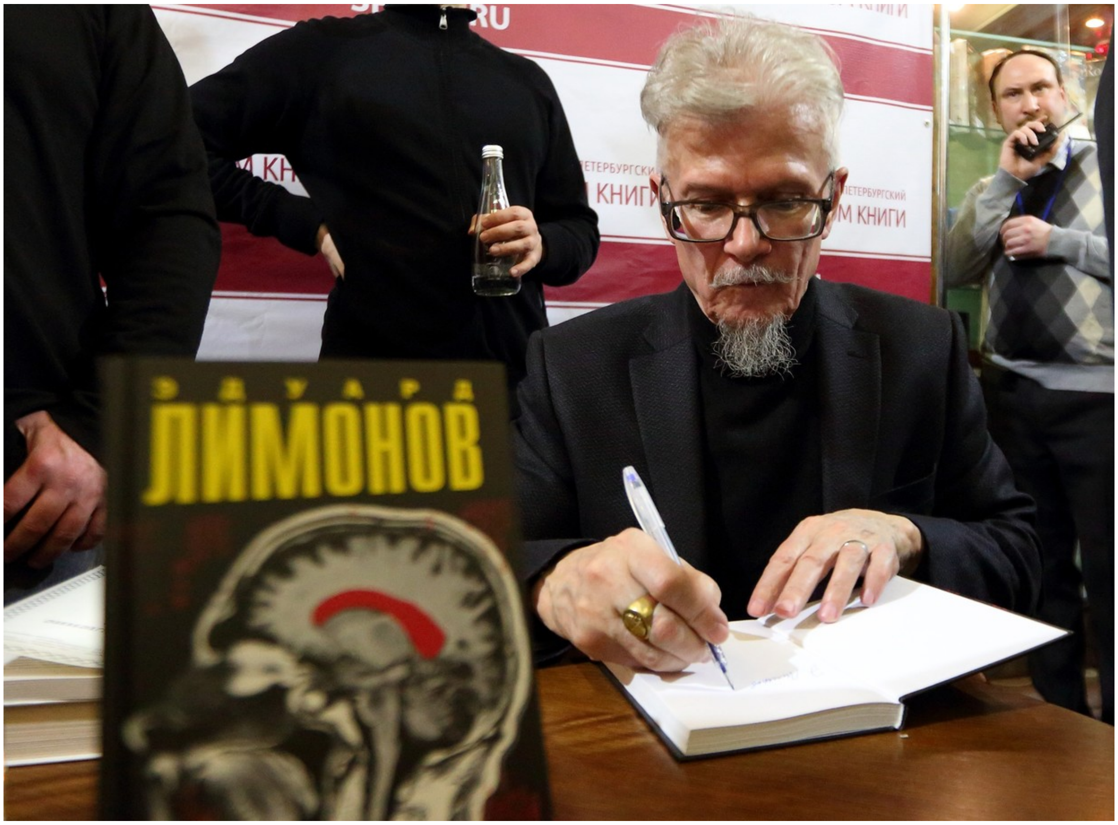
Over the years, Limonov would come to write dozens of books – novels, collections of poems and short stories, philosophical treatises, and essays.



Leader of 'Another Russia' party, writer, poet Eduard Limonov presents his new book 'And His Demons' at the House of Books on Nevsky Prospekt. © Photoagency Interpress / Global Look Press

Among the countless works, his Kharkov trilogy stands out in particular. As befits a Russian classic, Limonov offered his take on the classic Russian literature theme of childhood, adolescence, and youth. Another trilogy is known as the 'prison trilogy' and it was written during Limonov's imprisonment in Russia in the 2000s. Taking this dark page of life as a creative challenge, he applied his talent to describe prison life and the people that are part of it. The trilogy – 'Imprisoned by Dead Men', 'From Prison to Prison', and

'The Triumph of Metaphysics' – is rightfully considered one of the most powerful statements about the Russian people and the Russia that most artists prefer not to notice.

During his entire life, Limonov hardly had a day off from writing. In his last book, 'The Old Man Travels', he describes the chaos of an aged man's memories, represented as flashes of various episodes of his life. The book was submitted for publication just five days before his death.

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## Limonov the revolutionary

Having moved to Paris and published his first book, Limonov returned to his usual bohemian ways. Everything was going well for Limonov. Now a famous Parisian writer, he published one book after another. He was married to his new love – the singer and actress Natalia Medvedeva. By the end of the 1980s, Limonov had acquired French citizenship. But the life of a superstar author was too boring for someone who was a revolutionary at heart.

With the beginning of perestroika, Limonov underwent a major transformation, much to the horror of his Parisian friends. He criticized USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who was so heartily welcomed by the West, and gave numerous interviews to the French media, saying that the reformers are a disgrace to the Soviet Union and that his father, an NKVD officer, would've never approved of this.

> ***"In Paris, he was kicked out from all social circles and events. But by that time, he couldn't care less"***

said Limonov's translator Thierry Marignac about this period of his life.

A photo from the book 'Limonov in photos'. 'Taming the tiger. A loving tiger.'

Out of this rage, a new Limonov emerged – Limonov the politician. As the Soviet Union collapsed and people fled from the country, Limonov permanently returned to Russia and got his citizenship back (which had been revoked by the Soviet authorities). However, in those years he didn't stay in Russia all the time. In the biographical novel 'Limonov', which sold millions of copies across the world, French author Emmanuel Carrère wrote that Limonov couldn't live without waging his own war. In the '90s, just as he was about to turn 50, Limonov finally got his wish.

First as a war correspondent and then as a volunteer, Limonov traveled to various hot spots in the former USSR and Yugoslavia. In Bosnia, he sided with the Serbs, met the president of the unrecognized Serbian republic Radovan Karadžić and was even captured on film holding an automatic weapon and shooting in the direction of besieged Sarajevo.

*"The official reason for my escapades in those years was journalism,"* Limonov said*, "My diagnosis was simple: I was an adventurer working under the cover of a war correspondent."*

After Yugoslavia, he went to Abkhazia and Transnistria to fight on the side of the ethnic minorities that rose up against the central government of the newly formed states. According to war correspondent Vladislav Shurygin, who covered the conflicts, Limonov was a "good soldier." *"Of course, in his books, he always imagined himself as a commander, and perhaps he could've been one. But in Transnistria, he was a soldier. He marched ahead when ordered to go and stopped when he was ordered to stop. He ate what was available and slept where it was possible to sleep."*

In the new millennium, Limonov finally attempted to begin his own war. In 2000, along with his supporters, he traveled to Kazakhstan to back the Russian uprising in Semipalatinsk. When it failed, he started planning another one. He was eventually arrested in the Altai region along with seven other people and charged with illegal weapons possession, terrorism, and the preparation of a coup d'état. Limonov's lawyers managed to clear him of most charges, and he served a sentence only for illegal weapons possession.

A file picture taken on May 31, 2011, shows Russian radical leftist leader and writer Eduard Limonov gesturing from a police vehicle. © ALEXANDER NEMENOV / AFP

## Limonov the politician

Back in his emigrant days, Limonov was familiar with left-wing radical circles. In the US, he got to know American Trotskyists from the Social Workers Party and participated in their rallies. In France, he was friends with the leaders of the French Communist Party and regularly wrote for their newspaper.

But in Russia, Limonov couldn't just be a regular leftist. In 1993, he created a political Frankenstein – the National Bolshevik Party (NBP), the name of which partially referred to one of the 20th century's most horrific regimes. The party flag displayed a black hammer and sickle placed in a white circle against a red background – a direct reference to the flag of the Third Reich, with the hammer and sickle replacing the swastika. The party newspaper was called Limonka – not just a reference to Limonov's last name, but also to the nickname of the Soviet F-1 hand grenade, which was to become another symbol of Limonov the politician.

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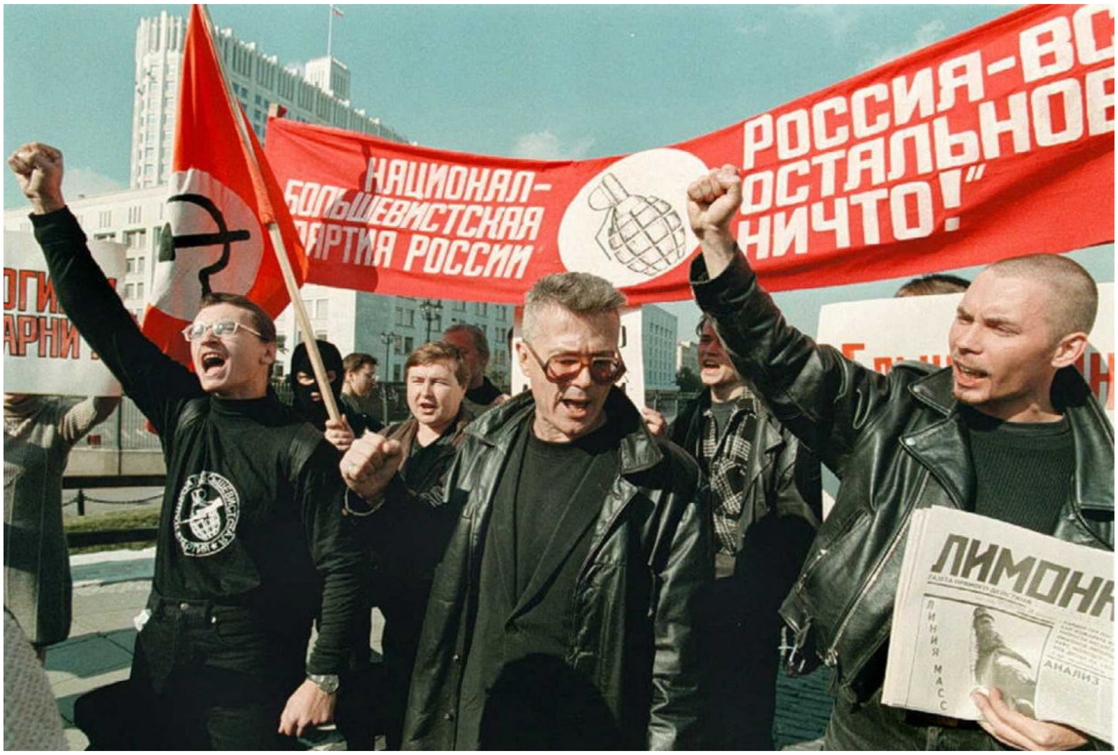
According to its own followers, the NBP was a radically anti-centrist party, *"totally 'right' and eternally 'left' at the same time."* Limonov himself didn't consider this a contradiction – in his opinion, the future of Russia lay in the joint hands of nationalists and communists.



The leader of the Russian National-Bolshevist party Eduard Limonov (C) marches with his supporters during a protest in front of Russian Government House against the 'capitulation' of Russia in Chechnya 12 September. The banner reads 'Russia is everything, the rest is nothing'.
© VLADIMIR NOVIKOV / AFP

NBP party members soon became known for their radical opposition to the authorities: during their relatively peaceful rallies, they threw mayonnaise, tomatoes, and eggs at political leaders and temporarily seized government buildings. The party, which Limonov had unsuccessfully tried to register since 1998, became known for its open support of war, terrorism, and revolution. In 2007, it was named extremist and banned by law.

When the NBP was prohibited, Limonov quickly created another party, The Other Russia, which was also never officially registered.

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In 2014, the authorities suddenly found Limonov on their side. In contrast to many other opposition members, the National Bolsheviks supported the return of Crimea to the Russian Federation. However, this turn of events surprised only those who weren't familiar with the writer's ideology. Back in 1999, on Ukraine's Independence Day, NBP party members seized the tower of the Sailors' Club in Sevastopol, which was then part of Ukraine. At about 10 a.m., the party members decorated the tower's striking clock, which performed the tune 'Glory to Sevastopol' with a banner that read "Sevastopol is a Russian city!" Then, they put up the NBP flag. Unsurprisingly, Limonov was made persona non grata in Ukraine and couldn't even bid goodbye to his parents, who remained in Kharkov.

After the "Russian spring" series of protests in Donbass, Limonov's party took an active part in the conflict and hundreds of its members went to the front as volunteers.

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However, the writer himself eventually became disappointed with the Donbass uprising, accusing its leaders of narrow thinking.

*"Why did you choose this path? You are too dependent on Russia, you could've had a lot more freedom. Why didn't you help Kharkov?! You abandoned Kharkov!"*

All things considered, Limonov wasn't successful as a politician – his multiple attempts to participate in elections consistently failed. However, the writer did have a strong political intuition, which sometimes verged on the prophetic. In 'It's Me, Eddie', published in 1979, he already envisioned things like the Black Lives Matter and the coming feminist movement. In the first years after the collapse of the USSR, and long before creating the NBP, he also predicted the war in Donbass and Crimea's return to Russia.

> ***"He largely authored modern Russia, creating slogans both for the opposition and the government"***

So wrote State Duma Deputy Sergey Shargunov in his column for the final issue of the Russian version of Esquire magazine, entirely devoted to the late author (a fact that some will surely find symbolic).

The American journalist Mark Ames, who was his editor at The Exile – an English language Moscow magazine – described him as "the last great Russian writer." Whether that is hyperbole, or fact, we will eventually find out.

*By **Georgiy Berezovsky**, Vladikavkaz-based journalist*