The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Farewell, Limonov, a Hand Grenade Amongst the Party Poppers

A Limonov may not have been interested in democracy, but democracy needs to be interested in Limonovs.

By Mark Galeotti

March 18, 2020

Eduard Limonov. **Anton Belitsky / TASS**

I never met Eduard Limonov, and now I never will. That saddens me, even while I recognize that I have a perverse curiosity about the contrarian radicals and radical conservatives, the romantics, rogues and the out-and-out rotters of Russia's nationalist extreme.

After all, in an age when Putin's regime has co-opted so many aspects of the conventional nationalist socio-political realm, from the Russian Orthodox Church and patriotic bombast, to the hagiography of the Great Patriotic War and unprogressive flat taxation, almost by definition oppositionists are positioned on its liberal flank.

Democrats and constitutionalists, advocates of LGBT+ rights and anti-racists, while they disagree with each other with zealous enthusiasm, the very venom of the disputes are often products of the relatively narrow genuine differences between their world views.

They are typically young, hip and smart. Brave, too, but in a strangely constrained way. They will unflinchingly stand in front of a phalanx of riot-armored OMON, but when they are arraigned on charges of attacking one of these gallant but strangely fragile defenders of the public order, you just know it's a frame-up.

On 1905 Square, where I remember Limonov's National Bolsheviks rallying, there's a striking statue, a bronze worker hefting a hunk of rock, presumably about the hurl it at the minions of the oppressor class: "The Cobblestone is the Weapon of the Proletariat." Today's liberals don't seem cobblestone type.

Not so Limonov.

Related article: Russian Writer, Political Activist Eduard Limonov Dies

From his open admission of having fought alongside war criminal Radovan Karadzic's forces in Bosnia to his enthusiastic support for the war in the Donbass, Limonov was of that fascistic breed which exalted action and will over legality and gradualism, with a strong side-order of self-conscious deviltry.

The very fact that his newspaper was called *Limonka* — Little Lemon — not just a play on his own name but also the slang for a hand grenade, the same hand grenade which would be a central motif on the banners on his NatsBol movement, spoke to this cocktail of fascism, radicalism, irony and narcissism.

Was Limonov a visionary or a poser, an artist or a politician, a leftist or a rightist? The answer to all of them is, of course, yes. In many ways he was a cliché, but he was not unaware of that: the point was that he chose his own cliché. He had will and agency. In 2006, he could join forces with Gary Kasparov in the Other Russia pro-democracy movement, and then become a frothing advocate of the undeclared war in the Donbass in 2014. He was, in short, his own master.

It is worth dwelling on Limonov's passing for three main reasons. First, he brought a particular kind of energy, of color and passion into Russian politics in a time when Putin, the archetypal grey man in a grey suit, seems determined to monochrome it. In cosplay politics, enthusiasm, disagreement and ideology are being simulated by a new generation of bland and infinitely plastic careerists.

Related article: No Rally for Limonov

The new *nomenklatura* is well-groomed, well-spoken, well-trained and well-versed in the habits of genuflection to power. Were opposition critic Alexei Navalny suddenly catapulted into the Kremlin, they would be sporting pro-democracy badges and hipster eyeglasses overnight. One can no more imagine them taking a contrarian stand — let alone an unpopular

one — than autobiographically outing themselves as bisexual, as Limonov did in *Eto Ya, Edichka*.

Of course, that color was often brown, with hints of black and red. Despite his role in Other Russia, Limonov was always fascistic in that Italian rather than German Nazi sense, aesthetic politics that exalted a hyper-masculine notion of will, action and national destiny. The NatsBol symbol of a Nazi flag but with a black hammer and sickle instead of a swastika was at once manifesto and deliberate blasphemy, again a Limonov trademark.

He spoke, thus, for what one could call the other, other Russia, the opposition to the Kremlin that comes not from the liberal, Westernizing end of the spectrum. It is easy to dismiss the so-called "red-brown" forces as frothing ultra-nationalists, narrow-minded anti-Semites and out-and-out Soviet nostalgics, and many indeed are just that.

But they are not necessarily — or all — fools or fanatics. Some come from a principled place in their own terms, however unpleasant it may be for Western (or Westernized) liberals. Others are able to articulate a complex, contradictory ideology.

Consider, for example, the leftist firebrand Sergei Udaltsov, who notoriously praised Josef Stalin (although he has since backed away from that position). He has spent much of his time since 2014 in detention or house arrest, but was still protesting in front of the FSB headquarters on Lubyanka Square last weekend.

Related article: A Rocky Start for Limonov's Bid for Presidency

Or, perversely, the way that Igor Girkin — "Strelkov" — may be considered a war criminal for his exploits in the Donbass, but his sense that Putin has betrayed Russians has led to his campaigning on a platform, largely likely composed by Konstantin Krylov, that sees genuine democracy as the best protection against further such betrayals.

None of this is to support their respective positions but rather to note that the Udaltsovs, Strelkovs, Krylovs and Limonovs represent strands of political opinion, even oppositionist ones, often ignored by the commentariat and yet with their own advocates in some serious quarters. I have met OMON who arrested Udaltsov and yet spoke of his with respect. I have met security officers who quote Strelkov's critiques of their bosses with approval.

And this is the final ironic challenge that Limonov posed and still poses. There has to be room for people like him who often seem to stand against the very foundations of the system. He was willing to oppose the regime blood and body when he felt that was right.

He was willing to support its actions just as fiercely when he felt that was right. Much was pose and ego — though could one not say the same about most political leaders? — but there was an underlying sense that politics had to matter and that personal ethics were at their heart. And, within the bounds of legality, a central challenge for any real representative system is how to accommodate those who seem so determined to be unaccommodating — like Limonov.

A Limonov may not have been interested in democracy, but democracy needs to be interested

in Limonovs.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/18/farewell-limonov-a-hand-grenade-amongst-the-party-poppers-a69666