Remembering Writer Eduard Limonov

Limonov died at age 77 on March 17.

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Eduard limonov **Evgenij Razumnyj / Vedomosti / TASS**

On March 17, writer and political activist Eduard Limonov died in Moscow of cancer at age 77. It was reported on the site of the political party, The Other Russia, that Limonov headed.

Limonov was born Eduard Veniaminovich Savenko in 1943 in Dzerzhinsk. He began to write poetry in 1958 and took part in his first political protest in 1963 in a strike against wage cuts. At age 17 he was already working in a variety of manual jobs including a loader, ironworker, welder, and construction worker.

In 1967 he moved to Moscow where he quickly gained celebrity more as a tailor than a poet: he sewed jeans and jackets for the entire Moscow underground. During his period in Moscow, he wrote and self-published poetry and was a well-known part of young literary Moscow. Somewhere along the way Savenko became Limonov, a nom de plume purportedly invented by the cartoonist Bagrich Bakhchanyan. In 1974, by his account, the KGB told him he either

had to become an informer or emigrate; he and his then wife, Yelena Shchapova, whom he married in an Orthodox Church ceremony — almost unheard-of at the time — left for New York.

In New York Limonov and Shchapova quickly divorced. Limonov worked as a proof-reader for the local Russian-language newspaper "Novoye Russkoye Slovo" while continuing to write prose and poetry. His largely fictional autobiography "It's Me, Eddie," was a sensation in the Russian diaspora and then in the Soviet Union, once a copy was smuggled in. Limonov's New York was not an émigré paradise. Written in a revolutionary style, "It's Me, Eddie" was brash, critical, obscene, pornographic and yet moving and utterly compelling. He would write other books about his time in New York including "The Butler's Story," in part about his job working as a private servant in a home on the upper East Side of Manhattan. He was author of more than 15 works of fiction and hundreds of articles.

At the same time he was writing fiction, he worked with the American Socialist Worker's Party and once handcuffed himself to the building of The New York Times to protest their refusal to publish his articles. He was eventually fired from "Novoye Russkoye Slovo, and in 1980 Limonov moved to France, where he became close to the leaders of the French Communist Party, who were instrumental in helping him get French citizenship in 1987.

However, as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, Limonov arranged for Russian citizenship and moved back to Moscow. Although he continued to write, both articles for the Russian press — and some in intentionally terrible English for "The eXile"— and fiction, he was more involved in politics, professing an odd, for Russia, mix of left and right. While he attended every protest against state impingement of the right to assembly and joined forces with Gary Kasparov to march in anti-governmental demonstrations in Moscow 2006-2008, he founded the right-wing, nationalist National Bolshevik Party and then, after it was disbanded under court order, the Other Russia party.

Limonov stood with the Serbs and was filmed shooting a machine gun at the Bosnians in the war in former Yugoslavia, supported the Abhazians in their war against Georgia, and took the side of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic against Moldova. He supported the Berkut officers who shot and killed protesters on the Maidan in 2013 and strongly supported both the annexation of Crimea and the war for separatism in the Donbass. He was arrested for arms possession and served a few months of a four-year sentence before being released on parole.

It is no wonder that Russian social media has been filled with heated arguments about Limonov and his legacy. Many people recalled the young Limonov and the incredible impression that "It's Me, Eddie" made on them. Film critic Anton Dolin wrote that Limonov "was a great Russian writer — there are few, if any, like him.," to which Maxim Pavlov, head of the cinema program of the Tretyakov Gallery, replied, "He was scum, ordinary scum..."

On her Facebook page, writer Liudmila Petrushevskaya noted that despite his despicable behavior, "We will never forget that flash of joy that readers felt with 'It's Me, Eddie'." Poet Lev Rubenstein recalled liking Limonov's early poetry, but not liking the man. "He reminded me of a little boy who locked himself in the toilet to scare his grandmother, and then his grandmother went out and the little boy had to sit there in the locked toilet."

The photographer Eduard Gladkov recalled meeting Limonov in the 1970s. "One morning on the way to work I met Limonov near my house. He'd come out of the next-door entrance, got into my car and started chatting away, saying he didn't care where he went... he said he'd spent the night in a stranger's apartment... and when he woke up, no one was there, so he left. He sounded very drunk as he told me this. I got worried and asked if he locked the door. He answered me, completely sober, "Of course, I locked it! Do you take me for an idiot?" And I suddenly realized that it was all a game, a game he played for himself, I suspect. He probably found it easier to write that way. Maybe some of those episodes from his later fiery life were a game, too?"

He will be buried in a private ceremony in Moscow.