

Russia's Grassroot Necropolitics: The Case of the National Bolshevik Party (with special reference to Eduard Limonov and Zakhar Prilepin)

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Abstract

The notion of death in the artistic, political and military activities of Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party (aka Other Russia) is examined from a psychoanalytical and a metaphysical viewpoint represented by Freud, Jung and Spielrein, on the one hand, and Aleksandr Dugin and Limonov himself, on the other. Limonov and Zakhar Prilepin serve as representative case studies against the background of the Balkan, Chechen and Ukrainian wars of the 1990s-2020s. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics provides the overall theoretical framework for discussion.

Question 151

The World Values Survey held in 2017-22 in sixty-six countries contained question 151, designed to find out if the respondents would fight for their country in the event of war. In Russia, where the survey took place in 2017 (when the country was already in a state of hybrid war with Ukraine), nearly 68% of those asked answered "yes" (see Haerpfer et al 2022). Yet in the autumn of 2022, some seven months into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an estimated 700,000 people left Russia abruptly to avoid mobilization by the armed forces (see Tofaniuk & Saprionova 2022). The high mortality rate at the frontline has instead been largely counterbalanced by eye-watering financial rewards for signing up that sometimes equaled millions of rubles per person (see e.g. Gerasimenko 2024 and Khorosho idut 2025). Also, heavy debtors and the long-term unemployed (see e.g. Dolinina 2023), foreign nationals (see e.g. Bartosiewicz & Żochowski 2024) and (chiefly) domestic convicts have been recruited (the latter, on the understanding that they would be set free if they manage to stay alive long enough; see e.g. Belovodyev 2024 and Denisova 2025). Last but not least, many ordinary draftees (banned by law from fighting abroad) have been tricked or forced into signing up for a

combat zone transfer (see e.g. Vakulina & Sheludkova 2024). At the same time, approximately 10% of the Russian troops engaged in the war (whose total number is estimated to be around 500,000) have gone AWOL in 2024 alone (see Kargin 2025).

Whether a result of a social desirability bias, or an alternative viewpoint (23.5% and 8% respectively answered question 151 as “no” and “don’t know”), or a heart change when push came to shove, or the wrong kind of war, or for any other reason – one thing is clear: a sizeable proportion of the 68% who had declared their readiness to fight for their country in 2017 would not convert into boots on the ground by late 2022. About half the size of the Russian army (currently numbering ca 1.5 million people) did not wish to be in it at wartime and the Russian authorities had to find an alternative solution to keep offsetting heavy war casualties (amounting in February 2022 – January 2025 to “a minimum” of 172,000 killed and “at least” 376,000 severely wounded, Clavilier & Gjerstad 2025). In other words, the Kremlin got involved in necropolitics, defined as “the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003: 11).

State-level necropower in Russia

This would not be the first time. The Red Terror of 1918-22, the Great Purge of 1936-38, the invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979-89) – to name but a few in the previous century alone – are the highlights of Soviet policies adopted to establish and maintain a kind of Marxism-based order, domestically and internationally. As the Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich (1994: 223-24, 227) put it, Soviet history is that of a

“Kingdom of Death. [...] We [the Soviets] are a people of war. We are either fighting a war or getting ready to do so. We have never lived differently. [...] Thanatology (a study of death) has governed us for too long. We have been taught how to die. We have learnt it well. [...] And we’ve unlearnt how to distinguish between war and peace, [...] life and death.”¹¹⁰

Such an outlook and behavioral pattern can be traced to the Marxist ideology. According to Mbembe (2003: 20),

“the subject of Marxian modernity is fundamentally a subject who is intent on proving his or her sovereignty through the staging of a fight to the death. [...] Terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history.”

Yet with the dissolution of the USSR and the Marxist doctrine falling out of the official favour, the Russian state still kept resorting to violent solutions of various difficult issues, mostly to do with conflicts over the Soviet ethnoterritorial legacy and the newly independent countries’ preferred allegiances. Suffice it to mention two Chechen wars of the 1990s – 2000s, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the Russo-Ukrainian war (2014-

¹¹⁰ All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

present), which can be classified as wars of recolonization (see e.g. de Nevers & Taylor 2023). To quote Mbembe again (2003: 23),

“The colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law [...] and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end’.”

This explains both the brutality and the longevity of the current Russo-Ukrainian war, where prospects for a truce (let alone a lasting peace agreement) appear slim. For the time being, the demand for manpower has been met by the Kremlin in accordance with Mbembe’s understanding of necropolitics, namely “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (2003: 27). It is therefore hardly surprising that, mindful of the lack of enthusiasm for enlisting and of the need to safeguard the titular nation (affected by negative demographics), the Russian authorities apply a combination of incentives and coercion to send to the battlefield (in addition to the population categories mentioned in the previous section) the ethnic minorities (for Buryats, see Agumava 2024; on the Chuvash, Tatar and Bashkir battalions in Ukraine see e.g. “Sura” 2025) – and the local population of Donbas (see e.g. Kibalnyk 2022).

In addition, addressing the reluctance of many Russian citizens to die for their country, the authorities have been practicing a nationwide thanatization, i.e. “boosting society’s death drive” (Epshtein 2023: 24) by trying to promote “a cult of death as a genuinely mass ritual and the highest manifestation of patriotism” (ibid., 26).¹¹¹ In this endeavour, the Kremlin has been partly preceded and partly assisted by the National Bolshevik Party (NBP).

“Yes to Death!”: Eduard Limonov’s NBP

From its foundation in 1993, by the author Eduard Limonov and the philosopher Aleksandr Dugin,¹¹² the NBP advocated an incorporation, by the Russian Federation, of post-Soviet territories populated by native speakers of Russian. The party promoted its agenda through direct actions, such as a temporary takeover of the tower at the Sailors’ Club in Sebastopol on 24 August 1999 (Ukraine’s Independence Day) with the slogan “Sebastopol is a Russian city”. The action caused an international scandal (the NBP members involved got arrested and charged with an attempt to damage the Ukrainian territorial unity, punishable by up to ten years’ imprisonment). The event could not have passed unnoticed by Vladimir Putin, whose first term as Russia’s PM had begun on 9 August 1999. Yet it took fifteen years or so until the annexation of Crimea became the Kremlin’s official policy, too, and got carried out.

¹¹¹ For more on this process, see Thomas Drew’s article in the same journal issue.

¹¹² For more on the NBP, see e.g. Fenghi 2020. For more on Limonov, see e.g. Rogachevskii 2003. For more on Dugin, see e.g. Barbashin&Thoburn 2014.

The NBP's direct actions were usually followed by police beatings, detention and jail sentences, not to mention the occasional lethal outcome for the party faithful. Since the NBP came into existence, hundreds of its members served time in prison, sometimes more than once; and dozens died in the line of party duty (see e.g. *Kratkii kurs* 2019). As role models for the living (and an indication of a death cult), a few of those killed were posthumously added to the editorial board of the main party newspaper *Limonka* (a double pun on Limonov's *nom de guerre* and a nickname for a hand grenade). The NBP's attitude to death is well illustrated by the party salute "Da, smert'!" (Yes to death!), signifying readiness to die for the party cause and inspired by the motto "Viva la muerte" of Franco's Falangists. The literary critic Viktor Toporov observed in 2006 that NBP members (or Natsbols)

"fight against life itself [...] – in fact, for the right to die a violent death. [...] A powerful creative impulse – a collective longing for death – [...] comes from a fiery Natsbol nucleus."

According to Vladimir Linderman (an NBP leader whom I interviewed in Uppsala in December 2010), to prepare NBP members for any eventuality, a samurai code of conduct has been adopted by the party (focusing primarily on the maxim "the way of the samurai is death"). The maxim has been taken from the 1979 book *Yukio Mishima on Hagakure*, which contains an English translation of comments by the Japanese writer and political activist Mishima (1925-70) on an early XVIII-c. collection of texts by Yamamoto Tsunetomo about the desirability of preserving certain samurai traditions in peacetime. By his own admission in a 1995 interview, Limonov came across a copy of the book while in emigration (i.e. well before launching the NBP), took it everywhere with him and kept rereading it over and over again. Quotes from *Yukio Mishima on Hagakure* can for instance be found in Limonov 1993, in a chapter entitled "A Heroic Attitude to Life".¹¹³

In Limonov's world, *Hagakure*'s take on the samurai legacy is intimately linked with a concept of heroism. For Limonov, a hero is someone "absolutely free because he has overcome the fear of death" (Pavlenko 1995: 90). Serving in the military does not automatically imply fearlessness, though. When criticizing the Russian army for its lack of will to stage a rebellion against the contemptible political establishment, personified by President Yeltsin, Limonov quotes this passage from *Hagakure*: "One cannot accomplish feats of greatness in a normal frame of mind. One must turn fanatic and develop a mania for dying" (Mishima 1979: 119). Limonov continues: "This is what every battalion or detachment commander in Russia should remember. Heroism is a special condition which has to be reached by getting into a state of frenzy. [...] Those

¹¹³ Cf. "In order to be a perfect samurai, it is necessary to prepare oneself for death morning and evening day in and day out. When a samurai is constantly prepared for death, he has mastered the Way of the Samurai" (Mishima 1979: 100), in Limonov's own Russian translation. A different Russian translation of *Hagakure* and Mishima's thoughts on it, in book form, under one cover, appeared three years later in St Petersburg (see Tsunetomo 1996). For more on Limonov and Mishima, see Chantsev 2009.

who have achieved the heights of heroism and rebelled are venerated by the people regardless of whether the rebellion is a success” (Limonov 1994).

Limonov first experienced war directly in late 1991, when visiting the siege of the Croatian town of Vukovar by the Yugoslav People’s Army, and it proved to be formative, despite his age (he was nearly fifty). Limonov was invited to the siege while at a book launch in Belgrade, by some officials from the self-proclaimed autonomy of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sylvania (which had been part of Croatia until its secession from Yugoslavia, with Vukovar as the autonomy’s capital). In 1992-93, Limonov also went to Bosnia and to the so-called autonomous republic of [Kninska] Krajina (where he joined Serbian separatists as a volunteer).¹¹⁴ He reported from the war theatre to French periodicals (see Limonov 2012a), and years later published a book about his adventures in former Yugoslavia. The book’s title was *Smrt*, a BCSM word for “death”.

In *Smrt*, Limonov (2008a: 71) calls the late XX-c. Balkan wars his testing ground, just like “the XIX-c. Caucasus used to be an exotic arena for the heroic deeds by the likes of Lermontov”. For Limonov, the Balkans looked like a “heroic land, in which heroic people [...] fought each other to death for their mountains, gardens and dark oak groves” (ibid.: 90). It was here that he realised: “things are important only if they lead to death” (ibid.: 91). It was here, upon meeting the future convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj (leader of the Serbian Radical Party, founded in 1991) that Limonov decided to establish a political party of his own:

“Šešelj’s party has armed units on the battlefield and a faction in the parliament. And I’ve been dreaming of becoming a putschist and a revolutionary [...] since childhood! [...] Now the tectonic changes have been taking place and the volcanic passions of peoples from the former USSR and Yugoslavia have awoken. It’s a good time for individuals like me” (ibid.: 100).

Unsurprisingly in such a context, the ultimate ambitions of Limonov’s own party, as described in his book-length party programme called *Drugaia Rossiia* (or Other Russia; this collocation has functioned as the NBP’s new name after the party got banned for extremism in 2007), have been formulated as follows: “Maybe Death will become our God” (Limonov 2004: 10).

Grassroot Necropower and Limonov’s Disciple Zakhar Prilepin

The author and politician Zakhar Prilepin can be considered a high priest of the NBP’s death worship.¹¹⁵ He initially encountered death in combat as a young police officer on a tour of duty at the first Chechen war in 1996, and joined the NBP the same year. These experiences defined Prilepin’s life for decades to come, and were respectively described

¹¹⁴ These short-lived ethnic enclaves may have served as a model for the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk people’s republics (LDNR) in Ukraine.

¹¹⁵ For more on him, see e.g. Orlova 2023 and Pertsev 2023.

in two loosely autobiographical novels, *Patologii* (Pathologies, 2005) and *San'kia* (2006). Prilepin's preference for controversial autofiction (describing in both books the deliberate and unapologetic killings of unarmed civilians), with elements of *roman à clef* (when the reader is unable to tell if the actions ascribed to identifiable prototypes happened for real), has roots in Limonov's own writing.

With few exceptions, from his scandalous debut novel *Eto ia – Edichka* (It's Me, Eddie; 1979) to the posthumously published travelogue *Starik puteshestvuet* (Old Man's Travels; 2020) and poetry collection *Zelenoe udostoverenie episkopa, slozhennoe vdvoe* (A Bishop's Green ID, Folded in Half; 2023), Limonov kept exploiting the only topic he could seemingly never get tired of: himself, presented in a heroic light. Prilepin's autobiographical persona is also "clearly positioned as a 'hero of our time', in Lermontov's words" (Rogatchevski 2012). Other typically Limonovian features in Prilepin's (and other Limonov-inspired) prose include (but are not limited to) social disaffection as a key impetus for creative activity; graphic sex scenes and copious profanity; desire to be different at all cost, frequently leading to self-contradictory statements and erratic behaviour; and obsession with making a lasting impact (e.g. political ambitions; revolution as a means of satisfying these ambitions by unsitting the ruling establishment; and the concomitant theme of death/immortality).

More specifically, Limonov's and Prilepin's war prose (including Prilepin 2017, 2019 and 2020 about the hybrid stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war) have the following tropes in common, listed here in no particular order of priority, as none has apparently been assigned to them by the two authors: policy shifts at the top bringing unwelcome changes to the battlefield; women; property expropriations; a stabilized frontline resulting in adventurous provocations; random death and luck in avoiding it (a near-death experience); what's for dinner; a distinct focus on soldiers/minders closest to the narrator/protagonist; and a special interest in private armies and volunteers.¹¹⁶

The NBP death-seeking ethos must have a great deal to do with the fact that over a hundred Natsbols joined the Donbas separatists voluntarily, soon after the Ukrainian war had begun (Chalenko 2017). The NBP also helped to send other volunteer fighters to the LDNR (some 2000 individuals in total between April and December 2014,¹¹⁷ see Prilepin 2015 and Azar 2017).

Contrary to the way the state-run army recruitment went after the full-scale invasion of 2022, money did not seem to play much of a role in the process organised for and by the Natsbols. Prilepin became one of such NBP volunteers. In the war's first four years he progressed from a humanitarian aid supplier to a deputy battalion commander. He claimed (2017: 19) that, until 2015, volunteers had been paid hardly anything at all and

¹¹⁶ Limonov and Prilepin did not always see everything eye to eye, though. In Prilepin 2019, Limonov is condescendingly described as a former visionary doer, who with time became a mere news commentator, so the authorities stopped paying attention to what he was up to. Conversely, in 2018 Prilepin was expelled from the NBP for aligning himself too close to the Kremlin.

¹¹⁷ Of the overall 35,000 or so, up to 90% of whom apparently came from Ukraine.

in any case their salaries amounted to approximately fourteen thousand roubles (or 230 US dollars) a month, i.e. were barely enough to live on.

The volunteers' motivations to head to the war zone varied from marriage breakdown to revenge for the civilian casualties reportedly inflicted on the Ukrainian pro-Russia sympathisers by their opponents (see Prilepin 2015; Prilepin 2020: 281). Yet the NBP members apparently went to Donbas to fight for a cause, protecting the interests of the Russian-speaking Ukrainian minority.¹¹⁸ Judging by the information available, it was the Natsbols' own initiative, of a potentially sacrificial nature, thus qualifiable as what can be termed "grassroot necropower", when individuals take upon themselves the decision concerning their own possible martyrdom, effectively establishing and exercising sovereignty over their own mortality. Mbembe (2003: 38) paraphrases such a mindset thus: "one is free to live one's own life only because one is free to die one's own death".¹¹⁹

The NBP's Death Drive: A Psychoanalytical Explanation

Applying a psychoanalytical framework to Limonov and his party members is justified because Limonov valued Sigmund Freud high enough to copy most of his *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (in Russian translation) by hand at the age of twenty-one. Even though much later Limonov (2003: 202) admitted that "psychoanalysis was not an exact science", he praised Freud for discovering the libido and the subconscious, which brought about "a breakthrough and a revolution in our understanding of human beings" (ibid.: 203). Limonov calls Freud an "extremist" (ibid.: 201) – which, coming from a certified extremist politician should be taken as a compliment – and claims that Freud is "not a humanist. There is no doubt whose side of the barricade he's on" (ibid.: 202) – presumably implying the National Bolshevik side.

In their actions, NBP members appear to be driven by an exceptionally strong death instinct, which Freud in his 1933 essay "Why War?" defined as

"being at work in every living creature and [...] striving to bring it to ruin. [...] The death instinct turns into the destructive instinct when [...] it is directed outwards. [...] The organism preserves its own life [...] by destroying an extraneous one" (1964: 211).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ They also wanted to get involved in Donbas's political life, hoping to restore Soviet-style social justice there (Azar 2017), but were denied the opportunity by the separatist leadership and its Moscow minders, who tended to treat NBP volunteers with suspicion. In the words of an NBP activist Aleksandr Averin, only "the chance to wage war under the competent guidance of specially trained people" was granted to the party members (ibid.). The Natsbols were not allowed to form substantial military units of their own, even though one NBP member, Sergei Fomchenkov (portrayed in Prilepin 2019 as Tomich), has reached the rank of a battalion commander. Moreover, several NBP volunteers were expelled from Donetsk (see Rogacheva 2015), while others got arrested and served jail time (see Smirnov and Shvets 2018) and Prilepin's battalion became dismantled after the assassination of Aleksandr Zakharchenko, head of the DNR (see Durnev 2018).

¹¹⁹ Cf.: For Limonov, death is "a means of enforcing his independent status (*samost'*) in the face of a comprehensively repressive [political] system" (Chantsev 2009: 126).

¹²⁰ This is a variation on an earlier excerpt from Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930: 97): "part of the [death] instinct became directed towards the outer world and then showed itself as an instinct of aggression and

Accumulated in society in critical quantities, the destruction instinct may lead to an all-out war. The philosopher Oksana Timofeeva elaborates:

”At war the subconscious desire to kill yourself [...] is transferred onto the Other. War is a kind of collective ruse: instead of committing a mass suicide [...], a country in a deep existential crisis attacks a neighbouring country under the pretext of defending some lofty ideals [...]. The irony is that the transference isn’t always working: by attacking the neighbour we’re doing damage to ourselves, too.”
(Arkhangel’skii 2024)

As Freud notes (1964: 211), when the death instinct is “turned to destruction in the external world, the organism will be relieved and the effect must be beneficial”. However, a residue of the death instinct always “remains operative within the organism, and we have sought to trace quite a number of normal and pathological phenomena to this internalization of the destructive instinct” (ibid.).

Prilepin’s *Patologii* lends itself comfortably to psychoanalysis. To begin with, the book’s title is a Freudian self-diagnosis.¹²¹ A dream describing how a Russian soldier peels off a Chechen’s head as if it was a potato (Prilepin 2006: 81) encapsulates the narrative vacillating between a constant awareness of the looming death and a no less constant (and demonstrably heightened) urge to eat and drink. According to Sabina Spielrein’s 1912 article “Destruction as the Cause of Becoming”, “eating equals copulating” from a physiological viewpoint (Cooper-White and Brock Kelcourse 2019: 224). Unsurprisingly, sexual desires are also present in *Patologii*, chiefly through memories and imagination: Prilepin’s alter ego, a detachment commander with the Russian special forces, goes to Chechnia as a result of a broken relationship with his girlfriend Dasha. Sexual failure as an impetus for warmongering has a psychoanalytical origin, described in Jung’s *Transformation and Symbols of the Libido* (1911): “Death fantasies [...] readily accompany the renunciation of the erotic wish” (quoted in Cooper-White and Brock Kelcourse 2019: 210).

In Prilepin’s account of the Donbas war (2019), belonging to the category of the living dead is a recurrent motif, e.g. (in the narrator’s own words) “I am not alive” (2019: 374), “a recently formed battalion of corpses that have gone cold” (even though none of the soldiers is even wounded yet; 2019: 11) and – in the words of the narrator’s wife characterizing him and his comrades-in-arms – “I perceive you as the living dead” (2019: 350). Limonov (2008a: 160) refers to himself in a war context as a “vigorous dead man”, too.

destruction”. Limonov was familiar with this work by Freud. He quotes a long passage from it (ibid.: 85) in a Russian translation in Limonov 1993: 30.

¹²¹ Needless to say, neither Limonov nor Prilepin were little when they experienced war. However, it is precisely the psychoanalytical claim emphasising the importance of childhood for human psyche that Limonov rejects (2012b: 257): “In my view, Freud’s statement that early childhood defines people’s future life is groundless. My experience as a child did not do anything for me”.

Such a paradoxical amalgamation of life- and death-related features also finds a psychoanalytical explanation, which posits that

“human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite – which we call ‘erotic’, [...] and those which seek to destroy and kill and which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct. [...] An instinct of the one sort can scarcely ever operate in isolation; it is always accompanied [...] [by] a certain quota from the other side” (Freud 1964: 209).

One of the first psychoanalysts to identify the death drive, Sabina Spielrein, states that “in order to bring forth life, death is necessary” and “the procreative act itself is self-annihilation”, because “without the destruction of the old state, change cannot and will not happen” (Cooper-White and Brock Kelcourse 2019: 223, 228, 234). Striving to build a different Russia, Natsbols believe that their plans are unlikely to come to fruition without a resort to violence. It can be claimed that the NBP’s revolutionary spirit is Spielreinian in nature (cf. her statement that “creation is also destruction”, Cooper-White and Brock Kelcourse 2019: 210). It is hardly coincidental that the imagery of *Patologii*’s opening scene (a minibus falling in a river, with one passenger managing to swim ashore and save another passenger, a little boy, in the process) is strongly redolent of Spielrein’s analysis of water symbolism in its relation to the dualistic concept of death-cum-rebirth (for details, see Cooper-White and Brock Kelcourse 2019: 213, 229-30, 238-39, 245).

The passenger – *Patologii*’s protagonist and Prilepin’s fictionalised double – saves the child at an additional risk to his own life. This is probably necessary to present the central character and narrator from the start in a positive light, as a caring, selfless and resourceful individual, before the reader learns that he is also a killer cop above the law. Given that the protagonist is autobiographical, it is hard not to interpret the book’s opening as an attempt at self-exoneration. As Freud put it (1964: 210), “the satisfaction of [...] destructive impulses is [...] facilitated by their admixture with others of an [...] idealistic kind”.

Needless to say, the fact that there is death drive at work does not automatically mean that human life loses its value. Actually, once the death drive has been transformed into the destruction instinct, the value of the destroyer’s life becomes directly proportionate to the number of lives that the destroyer has destroyed. Using death-driven people as a mere cannon fodder can therefore be seen as an unpardonable waste. This is probably why Limonov publicly expressed his indignation when in the autumn 2014 a group of some fifty NBP members were ordered to guard a frontline section next to Sokilnyky in the Luhansk region against a thousand or so Ukrainian troops: in the event of Ukrainian advance, the Natsbols would have undoubtedly been annihilated, making it a rather senseless “sacrifice” (Azar 2017). Thus, a sizeable proportion of “erotic” components in the destructive instinct contributes to an individual/group preference for the heroic mode of behaviour “as classically understood: to execute others while holding one’s own death at a distance” (Mbembe 2003: 37).

Death According to Dugin and Limonov: A Metaphysical Explanation

Psychoanalysis is not the only possible explanation of Natsbols' special relationship with death. The NBP leadership has helpfully provided two original conceptualisations of death, one by Dugin, who left the party in 1998 but remained an influential thinker among the party circles (and well beyond), and another by Limonov. Dugin's and Limonov's approaches, different though they are, both belong to a metaphysical, or mystical, tradition (Limonov uses the two terms as synonyms), which assumes that "along with the visible world, there exists a parallel invisible world. [...] [This] mystical dimension [sometimes] dominates over the physical one [...] or blends with it in copious amounts" (Limonov 2005: 6).

Dugin's views on the subject have been expressed most eloquently in his 2006 lecture "Smert' i ee aspekty" (Aspects of Death; see Dugin 2006 and Dugin 2009b: 223-63), given at the so-called Novyi Universitet (New University), an informal itinerant discussion group established in 1998, chiefly to promote Dugin's teachings (which, incidentally, link the notion of death with the Abrahamic religions while positing that God created universe out of nothing, i.e., in Dugin's interpretation, out of "an absolute death"; Dugin 2002: 294). Dugin differentiates between death as it was perceived (he claims) in pre-modern (prior to 1500 AD), modern (XVI-XX century) and post-modern times (from the late XX century onwards). Dugin argues that the key features of society in the pre-modern, modern and post-modern time periods are respectively connection (*sreda predaniia*, from *peredavat'* "to transmit"), interruption (*sreda razryvaniia*) and disconnection (*sreda razorvannosti*).

Initially, in the pre-modern "paradigm of thought" (as Dugin calls these three principal stages in humanity's understanding of what the world is like, see Dugin 2009a), "death as such does not exist [...] yet there is no life either as something separate from death. Life and death are somehow synonymous" (Dugin 2009b: 238). In the modern paradigm, death becomes "everything" and the "last heroic deed" still available to humans is "the right to die" (Dugin 2009b: 252). In the post-modern paradigm, even this right has been withdrawn. A concept of *bios necros* (dead life) is invoked to characterise what happens at the post-modern stage: death "has integrated life to such a degree that life is no longer aware of its own existence" (Dugin 2009b: 257). The postmodern human "is not mortal any more, [...] yet this makes him [...] not immortal but lifeless" (Dugin 2009b: 258).

The three paradigms function as a rule of thumb for almost everybody – with one exception, which Dugin refers to as "the Radical Subject", or someone who does not fully "match any of the paradigms" (Dugin 2009a: 612) and tends to retain the features that usually disappear in transition from one paradigm of thought to another. At the pre-modern stage, the radical subject is identical with life and can never accept death as its

part, however small. At the modern stage, the Radical Subject “acts as a murderer”, thus demonstrating to people “the value of life” (Dugin 2009b: 260-61), which they have allegedly forgotten. At the post-modern stage, the Radical Subject is simultaneously “life and death onto himself” (“sam sebe Zhizn’ is sam sebe Smert’”; Dugin 2006).

Who are these Radical Subjects, capable of killing others and themselves in the name of life as they imagine it? By mentioning Radical Subjects in the same breath with the political “movement” emblematised by a “bundle of rods”, or fasces, carried in public processions by the Roman civil servants known as “lictors”, Dugin (2009b: 261-62) hints: such individuals have a great deal in common with Fascism or Nazism. Given that the NBP is part-Nazi in its provenance (see e.g. Rogatchevski 2018), it is logical to come to the conclusion that Natsbols (including Limonov and Prilepin) are, by and large, little else than a self-selected association of Radical Subjects, who impose their own rules on life and death.

Never the one to follow in the wake of someone else’s train of thought if he could help it,¹²² Limonov has come up with an alternative explanation for the phenomenon of death, bordering somewhere between sci-fi horror and sheer lunacy. In his book *Eresi* (Heresies; 2008b), Limonov says:

People are creatures invented by a most complex civilization that controls planet Earth. [...] Human destiny is to die, so that people’s spiritual energy would recharge the accumulators of their Creators [who came from this superior civilisation]. [...] The day is near when we’d locate our Creators and attack them. A great battle will take place. We’ll immobilise them, capture them and uncover their secrets. We may even eat them and become immortal (Limonov 2008b: 55, 57, 60).

For some, this quote would testify to Limonov’s superiority complex.¹²³ For others, it would serve as evidence that he merely followed *Hagakure*’s advice: “Defy the gods if they block your path” (Mishima 1979: 133). On balance, any excuse for a self-destructive behaviour would do, theomachy and radicalism of all kinds included, when you need volunteers for a suicide squad.

The NBP as a unique role model?

Having gathered several possible (not necessarily exhaustive) explanations for the NBP’s self-sacrificial conduct, coming from both an outside and an inside perspective, two additional issues remain to be probed. When it comes to concerted and active death seeking on the battlefield, 1) to which degree if any is the NBP a specifically Russian phenomenon; and 2) has the party inspired anyone outside its ranks to join the separatists’ side in the hybrid war?

¹²² Cf. “Limonov does not go deep into thanatology – the philosophy of death and dying – in any of its aspects, either medical and biological, or ethical, or theological [...]. We will not find in his work what ancient philosophers called *commentatio mortis* or *meditatio mortis*. It is hard to locate in [his] text[s] a deepened expression of *fascinosum* and *tremendum*. Limonov does not avoid the topic of death but makes it his own” (Suchanek 2001: 141, 145).

¹²³ Limonov, portrayed as “starik Ed” (Old Man Ed) in Prilepin 2019: 332, is said to have been trying to play (demi)God in his later years.

The first question should be answered in the negative. To begin with, NBP party members include not only ethnic Russians but also e.g. Tatars, Roma, Blacks and Jews. Furthermore, according to Prilepin (2017: 316, 440-41, 452), the separatist cause attracted combatants from Ossetia, Chechnia, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Yakutia, France, Germany and Georgia, as well as Latvia, Poland, Canada, Finland, Norway and the US.¹²⁴ Finally, both the psychoanalytical and the metaphysical interpretations of death (drive) clearly account for a mankind-wide tendency. The NBP acts as a kind of magnet for people with a hypertrophied death instinct – but so arguably do skydiving, BASE jumping and motorcycling. The key difference is that the NBP activities at the Russo-Ukrainian war theatre are bound to inflict potential damage on many others and not oneself, first and foremost.

How influential has the NBP been as an early proponent of and participant in Russia's war with Ukraine since Spring 2014? This question is hard to answer in the absence of verifiable information about the exact numbers concerning Natsbols' presence at and input in the military operations in Ukraine (I have asked Averin, an NBP's current co-leader, to supply me with those but he has not responded). The NBP helped organize the arrival of thousands of volunteers from Russia in Donbas during the hybrid war. Yet most volunteers, if we are to believe Prilepin (2015), came from Ukraine, while many arrivals decided to go back to where they came from when their survival odds turned out to be low (Prilepin 2017: 120-21). What's more, by Prilepin's own admission (2015), it was (social) media reports about, and reaction to, the Russo-Ukrainian war, not Natsbols' example, that compelled people to volunteer. The NBP was not even the only pre-organised group of foreign combatants in the LDPR. Those included, among others, the Night Wolves MC and the adherents of the Russian National Unity movement.

What did seem to be affected by the NBP ideology and practices is Russia's Presidential Administration. The Kremlin has a long and checkered history with the NBP, persecuting some of its members while adopting some of its policies, such as expressing concern about Russian native speakers that inhabit the former Soviet territories. The NBP's disproportionate media presence (owing to their widely reported direct anti-government actions, as well as memorable NBP-related literary and visual art), coupled with advisory briefings (Dugin eventually became a Kremlin consultant and Prilepin confronted Putin personally a few times to impress the NBP and separatist agenda on him¹²⁵), is to blame.

With the Presidential Administration's (mostly involuntary) assistance that aggrandized the NBP more and more while attempting to marginalize it further and

¹²⁴ The full-scale invasion apparently widened the scope of those signing up on the Russian side to Africa, South-East Asia and the Middle-East, see Savina and Feoktistov 2005. These recruits have been likely motivated in their choice by pecuniary, rather than idealistic, considerations. According to *The Economist*, "as countries get richer, their citizens tend to become less eager to sacrifice themselves" (Raining 2024: 50).

¹²⁵ See e.g. Babitskii 2007 and "Prilepin posle 'priamoi linii'" 2018.

further, the party has achieved the level of publicity and recognition it would never have managed otherwise. As a result, the NBP “has saturated the air with [Limonov’s] contagious and explosive ideas and they have become a reality” (Prilepin 2019: 346). This reality, in some shape or form (such as the Russo-Ukrainian war, fuelled by necropolitics at the grassroot and state level), now concerns us all, wherever we are, whether we like it or not – and death may come sooner than we think. Forewarned is forearmed. A Hagakure-like training might come in handy. To quote from a Limonov obituary, “Limonov has died and now we live in his world, which values composure, fortitude and fearlessness” (Rubanov 2020).

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