

Roundtable

Multilingual Literature in Conflict Zones 19 November 2024

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The American Revolution: A Multilingual Combat Zone

North America constituted a multilingual conflict zone during the first successful uprising against European colonial rule. The Declaration of Independence was quickly translated and disseminated in Dutch, French, German, and Polish. Nevertheless, when the canonical Library of America published a three-volume collection of writings from the American Revolution, it was entirely Anglophone, including Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Paine, and Adams but omitting participants and eyewitnesses who wrote in languages other than English.

The British forces were bolstered by 30,000 German soldiers, whose letters and diaries provide an alternative perspective. French participation ensured the American victory, and the Marquis de Lafayette, Antoine-Jean-Louis Le Bègue, François Jean de Chastellux, and other Gallic authors provided important testimony en français. The Dutch Republic and the Kingdom of Spain also supported the rebellion. The Revolutionaries were inspired by the writings of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Cicero, Virgil, and other French and Latin authors.

The population of the thirteen colonies was not monolingual; German was the most widely spoken language in Pennsylvania, and French, Dutch, and, to a lesser extent, Swedish and Spanish were also spoken, as were indigenous languages, especially Iroquoian, Algonquian, and Muskogean; native tribes fought on each side.

The American Revolution inspired texts - and political actions - in many languages, including Juan Bautista Muñoz's *Cartas Americanas* (1779-1783), Aleksandr Radischev's "Vol'nost" (1783), Carlo Botta's *Storia della guerra dell'Indipendenza d'America* (1809), and Lion Feuchtwanger's trilogy *Die Füchse im Weinberg* (1947/1948). In reaction to the ambient multilingualism, it also encouraged Noah Webster and other nationalists to champion a single, unifying American language.