

Roundtable
Multilingual Literature in Conflict Zones 19 November 2024

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“The world is bathing in blood...”
***The multilingual poet Edith Södergran between
the Russian Revolution and the Civil War in Finland***

“The world is bathing in blood / so that God may live”. Edith Södergran’s (1892-1923) poem from 1918 expresses her hopes for a new era for humanity. Her poetry underwent radical linguistic, political, social, and religious-philosophical changes within a few years during global and local conflicts: she was born in Saint Petersburg, lived in Switzerland and returned to the border region in Karelia during WWI, experiencing the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War (1918) firsthand.

So far her transformation has been attributed to tuberculosis, Nietzscheanism, religious awakening, and modernist literary inspirations from Germany and Russia’s Silver Age. Researchers have conveniently ignored uncomfortable or complex topics like her multilingualism, multiculturalism or admiration of military heroes, including her initial support for the revolution.

But living close to the turmoils in Saint Petersburg, cut off from friends, family, German culture and language, and the earlier cosmopolitan life, and hosting officers and soldiers from Finland fighting at the nearby frontline during the Finnish Civil War, forced Edith Södergran to take a political and linguistic stand. The decision was apparently not easy. Södergran’s early poems contained anti-tsarist emotions, but the writings after the *coup-d’état* in Russia show a strong radicalization, then deep disappointment, and finally turning away from the world.

Södergran’s choice of Swedish as poetic language over her strongest language German, Russian, French, and English, reflects this multilayered process: her language became bolder, more colorful, defying, and challenging to the reader, while still containing a large amount of multilingualism.

Suggested reading: Sabira Ståhlberg, “Meine lieben fellow pupils. Edith Södergran’s hidden multilingualism”, in *Hidden Multilingualism in 19th-Century European Literature*, ed. Jana-Katharina Mende. DeGruyter 2023.

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110778656-009/html?lang=en>