



Robert W. Cherny. *Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 360 pp. Ill. \$36.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08230-6.

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Commissioned by Khal Schneider

For much of 2019 a debate raged in San Francisco over calls for the destruction of Victor Arnautoff's mural, *The Life of George Washington*, painted in 1936 in George Washington High School. The mural, like the school, was a New Deal project. It narrates episodes from the founder's life while also acknowledging slavery and Native American genocide. These national sins are depicted in vignettes that show black figures picking cotton and shucking corn or an indigenous man being trod upon by white settlers. As Robert W. Cherny, the author of *Victor Arnautoff and the Politics of Art*, argues, the mural offers a surprisingly explicit "counter-narrative" to period accounts of Washington's life (p. 109).

Critics in the 1930s praised the mural and made no mention of this counternarrative. But in 1968, when Arnautoff's granddaughter was at the school, students initiated the first call for its removal. What for Arnautoff was a radical gesture, was for black students a reminder of their lack of historical and symbolic agency. As Daryll Thomas, the head of the school's Afro-American club, argued: "sure we picked cotton, that's part of our history, but we would also like some recognition of the great contributions of black people to the sciences and industry" (p. 219). The solution was to commission local artist Dewey Crumpler to execute a new mural on the theme of black achieve-

ment. This worked until 2019 when new protests, led by First Nations students, parents, and activists, alleged that the mural's imagery compounds the violence that students of color already endure. Arnautoff's indigenous victim, it seems, has become a favorite meeting place for their peers, who casually invite one another to "meet by the dead Indian."

The current call for destruction was heeded by the school board, sparking a culture war that garnered national media attention. Liberals and conservatives alike decry the "cancel culture" motivating this decision.[1] As a consequence, it has been placed on hold. In the process, Arnautoff is in the spotlight after years of relative obscurity. And Cherny himself has become a protagonist in the battle to save the mural. Therefore, Cherny's biography, published in 2017, arrives at an opportune moment. For Arnautoff's life offers a unique lens through which to view the twists and turns of progressive politics over time. In the 1930s, his communism rendered him a progressive; in the 1950s, it branded him a subversive. It counts for little among today's progressives but serves as a cudgel for pundits who rail against what they view as the new McCarthyism at play in battles over history, racism, and public art. For liberals, Arnautoff's communism means his mural cannot be impugned. They argue that the protestors need

to be educated about his life, and that if they knew him better, they would realize that he was on their side. For conservatives, his communism is invoked to skewer the Left, which according to them is so out of control that it is eating its own.

Cherny's biography provides some perspective. It reveals how complex Arnautoff's relationship to communism actually was. It also shows that his art was often at the center of debates over censorship. Cherny begins with Arnautoff's birth in 1896, in Mariupol, a village in a province of what is now southeastern Ukraine. And he ends with his death, in 1979, in Leningrad at the age of eighty-three. The chapters are organized chronologically according to key phases in the artist's life as he moved from Mariupol to China, Mexico, the United States, and back to Ukraine under Soviet rule. His personal fate is set against the backdrop of major world events, from the Treaty of Portsmouth and outbreak of World War I to the civil wars that wracked Russia, China, and Mexico to the Great Depression, the Popular Front, and outbreak of World War II, and finally, McCarthyism and the Cold War. Cherny traces Arnautoff's political evolution from a pseudo-aristocratic cavalry officer in the tsar's army to a member of the Communist Party (CP) and finally, an obdurate defender of the Soviet Union. Drawing upon the artist's autobiography, interviews with surviving family members, personal correspondence, the artist's FBI file, and other archival resources, Cherny builds a comprehensive account of Arnautoff's achievements. And while Arnautoff's character comes through, this is not a psychological portrait. Rather, the real strengths of this biography lie in Cherny's ability to illuminate the impersonal events of political history through Arnautoff's life, and to a lesser extent, his art.

For historians of California, Cherny provides valuable information about San Francisco in the boom years of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, its immigrant and working-class communities, burgeoning institutions and art scene, major industrial, civic,

and proletarian leaders, and its role in both the New Deal's public works and McCarthy-era witch hunts. Another attribute is Cherny's chronicle of the growth and collapse of communist organizations in San Francisco, which is a subset of his survey of the city's growing Russian immigrant community during these years. Finally, in his account of Arnautoff's battles with McCarthyism, Cherny reconstructs one of the more eloquent, and successful, self-defenses mounted by a communist during this shameful episode in US history.

While Cherny surveys Arnautoff's development as an artist, his discussion of individual works of art is brief. As he notes in the introduction, this is not a work of art history. Therefore, readers looking for analysis of Arnautoff's murals, paintings, prints, and drawings will find little beyond what is readily apparent in the works themselves (many of which are reproduced in a color insert). In this respect his book complements but does not expand upon discussions of Arnautoff's murals in books by Anthony Lee, Barbara Melosh, and Karal Ann Marling, all of which focus primarily on the work he executed during the New Deal era.[2] Cherny does offer new information about his Soviet-era mosaic murals.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 cover Arnautoff's early life. The son of an Orthodox priest from the "peasant class" (pp. 1-2) and a descendent of British expatriots, Arnautoff had genuine empathy for the poor while also feeling a sense of legitimate inheritance as an artist. His parents' modest status in Mariupol afforded him advantages such as a classical education and entrée to the officer's corps. Cherny emphasizes Arnautoff's precarious position as a noncommissioned officer who was neither a member of the rank and file nor from the nobility. This precarity was exacerbated by the outbreak of the October Revolution in 1917, which resulted in large territorial losses. Cut off from his family in the Ukraine (which became part of Germany), Arnautoff ended up in Sim-

birsk, a city on the Volga, where he joined the White Army. This fateful decision obfuscated his return for decades after the Bolshevik victory forced him into exile. He ended up in China, where he served in General Zhang Zoulin's cavalry, met his wife, Lydia Blonskii, and sired two of his three sons before leaving for the United States to study art.

Chapter 4 finds Arnautoff in San Francisco, where he enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts (CFSA) to study sculpture and mural painting. As his student visa neared expiration, Arnautoff moved his family to Mexico City to pursue mural art while he and Lydia applied for citizenship. Chapter 5 relates Arnautoff's years in Mexico, where he supervised work on Diego Rivera's murals while Rivera was in San Francisco painting frescos at the Stock Exchange and the CFSA. Cherny claims that Rivera's San Francisco murals "included no criticism of capitalism or colonialism" (p. 71), but other scholars have shown that this is not the case. For example, in *Allegory of California* (1931), the theme of telluric abundance is undermined by the disarticulated body of the female allegory and a pressure gage that has red-lined, indicating that the capitalist exploitation of the land is about to blow. Arnautoff's role in Rivera's murals is barely visible. Rivera's influence on Arnautoff's development, however, cannot be denied. In Arnautoff's subsequent murals we see the unmistakable influence of Rivera's compositional devices, color palette, and rendering of the human figure. Moreover, Arnautoff seems to have learned from him how to embed critical vignettes within scenes that appear, at face value, to honor the patron's wishes. This lesson served him well for much of his career as a public artist.

In chapter 6 Cherny recounts Arnautoff's rise in San Francisco's art world against the backdrop of the Great Depression. Rivera's time in the city paved the way for large mural projects, and once the New Deal arts programs were underway, San

Francisco enjoyed federal patronage for public works. Arnautoff was commissioned to paint murals and serve as technical director for the Public Works of Art Project at Coit Tower. Cherny relates the controversy that ensued over some of the artists' inclusion of communist imagery. This controversy arose amidst the maritime and longshore strikes in 1934 which closed the bay and were then violently repressed on "bloody Thursday." The artists held their ground in solidarity with the strikers and Rivera, whose mural at Rockefeller Plaza in New York City was also under attack. Ultimately, Clifford Wight's mural was censored, but Arnautoff's was not. His fresco, *City Life* (1934), which included subtle critiques of finance capital and the exploitation of the poor, survived owing to his "catholic" ability to show the good and the bad without endorsing a particular political solution (p. 95). It was during these years that Arnautoff became involved with the CP, tentatively at first, and largely as a consequence of his support for the strike, a theme that he addressed in his more radical prints.

By the mid-1930s, Arnautoff's career was in full swing. Chapter 7 covers subsequent federal commissions for murals at the Presidio, George Washington High School, the San Francisco Art Institute and post offices in San Francisco and Pacific Grove, California; College Station and Lindon, Texas; and Richmond, Virginia. In these years he became a leader in communist circles due to the Popular Front policy of coalition-building and pro-Soviet sentiment after the German invasion in 1941. Cherny tracks Arnautoff and his wife's involvement in a number of Russian American organizations dedicated to promoting cultural appreciation for Russian art and literature and support for its fight against fascism. Arnautoff's desire to return to his childhood home seems to have been the primary incentive for his late embrace of communism despite the facts that Bolsheviks had forced him into exile and Stalinists had murdered his father. Nonetheless, through propaganda circulating in leftist print media, he began

to romanticize Soviet achievements and grew increasingly judgmental of American life.

Cherny's lucid analysis of this period illuminates not only Arnautoff's paradoxical embrace of the Soviet Union but also the growth of his ethnonationalism, which developed as a consequence of exile. In chapters 8 and 9 Cherny tracks the slow demise of the Left during the Cold War, a period during which Arnautoff was classified by the FBI as a COMSAB ("communist with potential for sabotage") and restricted from travel. During these dark years he faced California's Unamerican Activities Committee (CUAC) for satirizing the red scare in a widely publicized print. During the trial he was repeatedly asked to confess his membership in the CP and threatened with the termination of his contract at Stanford University. He prevailed, but this experience both confirmed his desire to emigrate and finally convinced Soviet authorities of his loyalty (they had denied his application twice).

The final chapter details Arnautoff's life in the Soviet Union, where he continued his career, remarried, and was reunited with surviving family. In these years, he drafted his autobiography while enjoying the perks of minor celebrity. He maintained his support for Soviet policy even as he relied on relatives in the United States for medication and supplies and even though it alienated him from his sons and brother. In the end, Cherny's biography is as much about the "politics of art" as it is the damages of war and the vagaries of exile.

Cherny's biography offers nuance to an otherwise reductive debate over Arnautoff's politics and art. But it will do little to dissuade protestors, who object to his mural's effects, not to the artist's intentions. And while Arnautoff was an ardent defender of expressive freedom against state censorship, it is difficult to know how he would respond to criticism from the very people he thought he was vindicating. What is certain is that his "catholic" strategy is no longer effective in an ur-

ban environment that has slipped the control of San Francisco's elite.

Notes

[1]. Michele H. Bogart, "The Problem with Cancelling the Arnautoff Murals," *New York Review of Books Daily*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/09/16/the-problem-with-canceling-the-arnautoff-murals/>, accessed September 16, 2019.

[2]. Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Karol Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982); Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

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