THE ANTOURA ORPHANAGE

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Category: Opinions

By Edward Tashjian, Beirut, Lebanon, 23 April 2026

The Collège Saint Joseph – Antoura began as a 19th-century French Lazarist institution, part of a broader Catholic educational network that spread across Mount Lebanon during a period of expanding European missionary and cultural influence. By the late 1800s, it had developed into a prominent regional school.

This institutional continuity was abruptly broken during the Armenian Genocide. In 1915, under orders from Jamal Pasha, the college was seized by Ottoman authorities, the Lazarist priests were expelled from the campus, and it was repurposed into an orphanage. The Ottoman leadership, particularly in the Syrian provinces under Jamal Pasha's control, viewed orphaned Armenian children as a population to be re-engineered.

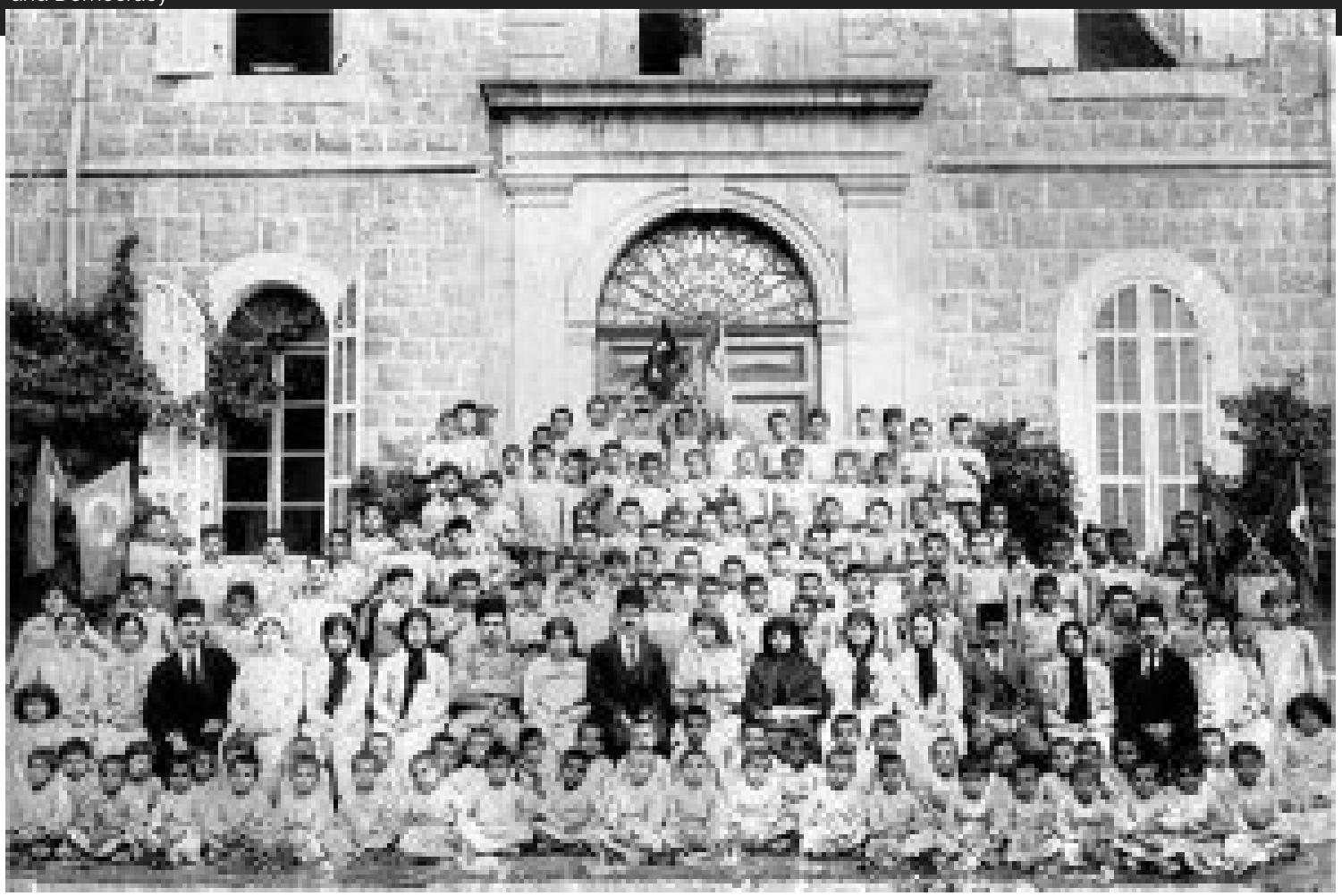


The Antoura orphanage became one of the clearest examples of this policy in practice. The

orphanage functioned as an insidious social experiment tied directly to the destruction and reconstruction of identity. Approximately one thousand Armenian and four hundred Kurdish children were forcibly transferred there, often from other orphanages previously run by missionaries. Their families had already been destroyed through deportations and mass violence; in fact, the Ottoman state itself had produced these orphans before placing them under institutional control. What remained was the question of what would become of the children. The answer, in Antoura, was systematic assimilation.

Upon arrival, the children were stripped of their identities. Armenian names were replaced with Turkish or Muslim ones, often preserving only the initial letter as a superficial link to the past. They were compelled to speak Turkish, prohibited from using Armenian, and subjected to an education designed to instill loyalty to the Ottoman state. Children were also required to organize and perform theatrical plays in Turkish once a week, a practice intended to reinforce linguistic discipline and the internalization of their imposed identity. The process extended beyond language. Boys were circumcised, and conversion to Islam was enforced. The orphanage thus functioned as a site of cultural erasure, where identity itself became the primary target.

A central figure in this process was Halide Edib Adıvar, a prominent Turkish intellectual and nationalist who oversaw the institution for a period. Some of the children initially assumed that her presence signaled a softer regime, expecting that a woman might bring a less severe form of discipline. That expectation quickly collapsed as Edib's role reflected and reinforced the broader project of Turkification and Islamization, and the system she administered operated through coercion, suppression and strict discipline rather than the humanitarian framing she later advanced.



Life inside the orphanage was harsh and often lethal. The orphans experienced chronic hunger, disease, and routine punishment. Discipline was enforced through methods such as the *falaka* (beating the soles of the feet) while even minor acts of resistance, like speaking Armenian, could result in severe consequences. Mortality was high, not only because of direct abuse but also due to the cumulative effects of deprivation and neglect, as well as diseases like typhoid. Those who died were buried in nearby locations, including caves, often without proper markers.

Decades later, in 1993, their remains were rediscovered and reburied inside the cemetery of the Collège Saint Joseph – Antoura. In 2010, a memorial khachkar (stone-cross) was also erected there.

Yet the story of Antoura is not one of total submission. Many children resisted in whatever ways they could. They whispered Armenian prayers, recalled the lullabies their mothers used to sing, and secretly preserved fragments of language and memory. When the orphanage fell under the control of the American Red Cross following the Ottoman withdrawal, this resistance became overt: children refused to use their Turkish names and retrieved Armenian books they had hidden during the years of Ottoman administration. These acts, though small, represented a refusal to fully internalize the imposed identity. They also reveal a crucial dimension often overlooked in institutional histories: the

persistence of individual agency under extreme conditions.

The collapse of Ottoman rule in 1918 brought an abrupt end to this system. As Ottoman officials withdrew, the orphanage was effectively abandoned. For a brief period, the children were left without supervision or adequate supplies. When external assistance arrived, most notably through the American Red Cross and figures such as Bayard Dodge, it revealed the extent of the neglect. The transition from Ottoman control to international relief marked a shift from coercion to recovery, though the damage inflicted on the children was already done.



Jamal Pasha (in the middle in uniform). The photograph was taken in front of the school/orphanage. The woman standing beside Jamal Pashato is Halide Edib Adıvar.

Our understanding of daily life in Antoura owes much to survivor accounts, particularly the memoir *Goodbye, Antoura* by Karnig Panian. Panian's work stands as a critical rejoinder to the self-justifying narrative presented by Halide Edib in her own memoirs. Her account frames the orphanage as a product of wartime necessity, Panian offers a detailed, unsentimental portrayal of loss, resistance, and survival. He demonstrates that even young children recognized injustice, organized among themselves, and actively sought to preserve a sense of identity and belonging under conditions

designed to erase both. His testimony is not merely descriptive but also analytical in its own right, revealing children as conscious historical actors rather than passive victims.

The significance of Antoura lies in what it reveals about how violence can operate beyond the battlefield, the desert, villages and towns, and shows how it can also be embedded within institutions that outwardly resemble schools or orphanages. It also demonstrates the limits of such projects. Despite sustained efforts, many children reclaimed their identities after the war, underscoring that cultural erasure, while devastating, is never fully complete. Panian's survival and later life ultimately reinforce a difficult but necessary conclusion: even when humanity is systematically denied, it can, under certain conditions, be reclaimed. Seen from the perspective of identity transformation, Jamal Pasha's project in Antoura ultimately failed to fully achieve its intended outcome.

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Comments



Sarah Leah Whitson – 2026-05-04 04:37:54
Excellent article, very informative. I know my grandfather was in an orphanage in Lebanon from which he fled, but which one, I don't know...