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Forcibly Transferred and Assimilated: Experiences of Armenian Children during the Armenian Genocide

> "Forget your old name! Forget it! From now on, your name will be Ahmet, and your number will be 549!" The other boys in the room were shaking like leaves. It was my turn next. I said my name was Karnig. Now it was my turn to be slapped across the face and fall to the floor, crying. The schoolmaster then kicked my sides as I lay prostrate on the floor. I eventually passed out from the pain. When I came to, I was lying in a bed. I had never been in this room. I saw more orphans, each lying in a bed of his own. I couldn't see very well, and I shut my eyes again and fell back asleep. Two days later, I found out that I was in the clinic, and that I had been the first orphan brought there.[1]
>
> Karnig Panian

This excerpt from a memoir written by an Armenian Genocide survivor, Karnig Panian [Garnik Banian], shows how, at the age of five, he encountered a brutal Turkification process. This and other accounts refer to the forcible transfer and assimilation of young Armenian women and children into the Muslim community, with an aim to annihilate the Armenian population. The Armenian Genocide (1915–1923) was the culmination of anti-Armenian persecution and pogroms in the Ottoman

1 Acknowledgment: The work published within this contribution was supported by the Science Committee of RA [grant number 21T-6A315]; Karnig Panian, *Goodbye Antoura, A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 80.

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Empire that began in the 1890s and strove to change the demographic composition of the Armenian provinces and erase the traces of Armenian existence in their homeland. Unprecedented in its scale and cruelty, the Armenian Genocide resulted in the eradication of nearly 1.5 million Armenians.

Under the guise of the First World War, the Ottoman government implemented the preplanned destruction of its indigenous Armenian population. The Armenian male population was predominantly decimated through conscription into the army, where they were either killed or worked to death in road-building battalions. Those not included in the army service were rounded up, arrested, and killed at the beginning of deportations. Later, hundreds of leading Armenian political, intellectual, cultural, and religious leaders were arrested, deported, and/or killed. The Turkish authorities ordered the deportation of the remaining Armenian population who were mainly women, children, and the elderly, deprived of men and an elite capable of protecting them, to the Syrian deserts.[2] During these death marches, the deportees faced inhumane suffering.[3] Deportation caravans were intentionally left unguarded and, as a result, were constantly attacked by local populations who killed, violated, and robbed the deportees. Others died of starvation, dehydration, diseases, and general exhaustion. Apart from physical abuse, young women and children deportees were stolen, bought, and sold during the deportations; they were taken into sexual slavery, and placed in harems, brothels, or Muslim households, often in the homes of those who had killed their family members. In an atmosphere of total devastation and physiological pressure, mothers voluntarily gave their children to Muslims in an effort to save them. There were also instances of mothers being forced to sell their children to feed and save others.[4] Apart from the physical suffering, Donald Miller and Lorna Miller identified the emotional suffering of the

2 For more on the Armenian Genocide, see: Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York and London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

3 For information regarding a general picture of children's experiences during the Armenian Genocide, see for example: Asya Darbinyan and Rubina Peroomian, "Children: The Most Vulnerable Victims of the Armenian Genocide," in *Plight and Fate of Children during and following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 57–83; Henry C. Theriault, "'Hell Is for Children': The Impact of Genocide on Young Armenians and the Consequences for the Target Group as a Whole," in *Plight and Fate of Children during and following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 30–56.

4 Keith David Watenpaugh, "'Are There Any Children for Sale?': Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915–1922)," *Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 3 (2013): 283–95.

deportees—grief, fear, insecurity, witnessing the murder of their family members or fellow citizens—and what they called the tragic moral choices that encompassed dilemmas like whose life was more value, which child should be chosen to be kept, and which one was to be abandoned. These choices also included decisions on whether it was preferable to give a child to a Turk or Kurd, knowing that the child would lose their Armenian identity but still survive.[5]

During the Armenian Genocide, the forcible transfer and assimilation of Armenian children was a structural component of the Ottoman genocidal policy which was planned by the Young Turk Government and implemented as soon as the deportations began.[6] The process was legalized by governmental decrees and orders which instructed the relevant authorities to first gather the children of deported Armenians younger than ten and place them in government-run orphanages.[7] Later, this policy was extended to cover children up to twelve years old; the age limit for girls was up to fifteen years old.[8] Armenian children were to be distributed to prominent figures in the villages where no Armenians or foreigners lived.[9] The government paid a monthly allowance to care for these children.[10] The policy of forced transfer, its implementation on the ground, and the results thereof were closely controlled and monitored by the government.[11] The number of children subjected to these forced assimilation policies is calculated to be nearly two hundred thousand.

By re-centering children and their active positions in narratives of the genocidal forced transfer, this chapter gives them a voice and analyzes the microcosms of the "assimilation industry," drawing from the lived experiences of those children who had been forcibly transferred into state institutions and individual households with an aim to annihilate their

5 Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, "Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide," in *Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (London: Macmillan, 1992), 153–68.

6 Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 316.

7 See for example: Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity*, 316–17; Ümit Kurt, "Cultural Erasure": The Absorption and Forced Conversion of Armenian Women and Children, 1915-1916," *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 7 (2016): https://journals.openedition.org/eac/997.

8 Kurt, "Cultural Erasure"; Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity*, 325.

9 Akçam, *The Young Turk's Crime Against Humanity*, 317; Ugur Ümit Üngör, "Orphans, Converts and Prostitutes: Social Consequences of War and Persecution in the Ottoman Empire, 1914–1923," *War in History* 19, no. 2 (2012): 176.

10 Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity*, 317.

11 Üngör, "Orphans, Converts and Prostitutes," 176.

Armenian identity and build a new identity. Based on these children's testimonies, this chapter also examines how they accepted their forced national identity change and, later, their liberation, and return to their Armenian one. The only memoir by a perpetrator, that of Halide Edip, the principal of one of the state orphanages where Armenian orphans were Turkified, obscures the true nature of transfer and assimilation policies.[12]

Ara Sarafian has identified four ways through which the process of forced transfer and absorption of Armenian young women and children was carried out: (1) "voluntary" conversion of individuals in the initial stages of the genocide; (2) selection of individual Armenians by individual Muslims for absorption into Muslim households; (3) distribution of Armenians to Muslim families by government agencies; (4) assimilation of selected Armenian children in state-run orphanages.[13] A deliberate atmosphere of violence and abuse that resulted in the forced surrender of Armenian children and some children fleeing by themselves to Muslims to be saved can also be added to these points.

The "voluntary" conversion permitted to some Armenians at the beginning of the genocide is not within the scope of this chapter, but it should be mentioned that this practice was assessed as a "method of securing the disappearance of the Armenian race."[14] The process of selection of individual Armenians by individual Muslims for absorption started at the initial stages of deportations and was carried out during the genocide. For this purpose, the Armenian children were not only absorbed by selected Muslim families, but the deportation caravans were also intentionally left unguarded so local Turks, Kurds, and Arabs were able to take women and children by force during the death marches or at the concentration places.[15] Armenian children were distributed among

12 Shushan Khachatryan, "Halidé Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 49–79; Selim Deringil, "'Your Religion is Worn and Outdated.' Orphans, Orphanages and Halide Edib during the Armenian Genocide: The Case of Antoura," *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 12 (2019): 33–65.

13 Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide," in *Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov and Mack Phylis (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 210–11.

14 Charles E. Allen to G. Bie Ravndal, report dated Adrianople, March 18, 1916 in Ara Sarafian (comp.), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide: The Peripheries* (Boston: Armenian Review, 1994), document number 39.

15 For an abundance of evidence of this practice, see for example: Edita Gzoyan, *The Aleppo Rescue Home: 1464 Accounts of Armenian Genocide Survivors* (Yerevan: AGMI, 2021).

influential families as adoptees but most often as servants without any remuneration and they were frequently subjected to inhumane treatment.[16] Survivors' testimonies and other sources refer to the involvement of governmental organizations and agencies in the process of transfer and assimilation. For example, the Red Crescent Society, its subsidiaries, and affiliated organizations were involved in the collection and distribution of Armenian children and young women to Muslim homes.[17] The Society for the Employment of Muslim Women transferred hundreds of children to Constantinople (Istanbul), distributing Armenian girls to Muslim households selected by the Ministry of Interior and boys to factories, workshops, ranches, and small businesses.[18] Children were also taken by the officials themselves.[19]

Utilizing the change of national identity as an explanation for the rationale behind forcible transfer and seeking to create a political culture where national identity was prioritized over family identity, the Turkish ruling elite pursued the assimilation of "valuable" Armenian children.[20] With this aim, the Ottoman government placed selected Armenian children in state orphanages, which were established as early as the beginning of the First World War with the long-term goal of assimilating transferred Armenian children.[21] Surrounded by the population that had killed their family members and relatives, being told that there were no Armenians left alive, and living under latent threat, Armenian children had no choice but to adapt to the new situation. The youngest children easily forgot their past and assimilated, but the older ones, conscious of what was happening to them, were afraid to express their thoughts.

Miller and Miller's pioneering work on the oral history of the Armenian Genocide identified children and women as a separate victim group

16 League of Nations Archive at United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), Social Section, Classement 12, Document 9640, Dossier 4631. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy, Social Section of the League of Nations.

17 UNOG, Social Section, Classement 12, Document 9640, Dossier 4631. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy, Social Section of the League of Nations, also UNOG, Classement 12, Document 15100, Dossier 4631, Interim Report by Dr. Kennedy, August 25, 1921.

18 Nazan Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," *Childhood Vulnerability* 1 (2018): 18.

19 UNOG, Interim Report by Dr. Kennedy; Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," 19; Gzoyan, *The Aleppo Rescue Home.*

20 Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1, (2009): 60–80; Üngör Uğur, "Orphans, Converts, and Prostitutes," 173–92.

21 Üngör Uğur, "Orphans, Converts, and Prostitutes," 176.

who were differently treated and affected during the genocide.[22] By prioritizing the study of childhood and recognizing the role and position of children in the landscape of the genocide, Nazan Maksudyan further placed children as "legitimate historical actors" giving rise to their voices and putting them at the very center of the historical narrative.[23] Although memoirs are stories written by individuals about their own lives, they have a broader dimension, containing elements of the history of the times and the community to which the authors belonged. In the words of Lorne Shirinian, in order to understand the memoirs, we must "ask what the survivors' responses are to their experiences as they translate knowing into telling." Shirinian further stresses the importance of showing their deep pain and teaching people the history through their lived experience, sometimes going beyond the personal and putting the Armenian Genocide in a wider human context.[24] Vahe Tachjian further stresses the importance of the survivors' memoirs which present their daily life, inner mind, struggle, and resistance; topics that cannot be found in state documents.[25]

It should be noted that there is an immense literature of memoirs, diaries, oral history, and novels about the Armenian Genocide already being written from 1916; others were written in the 1950s.[26] Among those testimonies (both written and oral) are those by survivors who passed through the forced assimilation during the Armenian Genocide and detailed the practices they went through with their personal evaluations as to what had happened to them. These testimonies help to build an overall picture and to understand the essence of this genocidal crime which was perpetrated against some Armenian children. They also help us to understand children's actions and their agony.

22 Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, "Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide," in *Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. by Richard Hovannisian (London: Macmillan, 1992), 153–68; Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

23 Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 161; Nazan Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," 16.

24 Lorne Shirinian, "Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide as Cultural History," in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovhannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 167.

25 Vahe Tachjian, *Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries 1915–1918* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 2–3.

26 Asya Darbinyan, "Recovering the Voices of Armenian Refugees in Transcaucasia: Accounts of Suffering and Survival," *Armenian Review* 57, no. 1-2 (2020): 1–35; Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," 19–21.

Transfer and Assimilation in the Memoirs of Survivors

The process through which the selected Armenian children were incorporated into the Turkish community was by forcibly taking them from their Armenian community, isolating them, and preventing any future connection, thus stripping them of their identity and imposing a new one upon them. Rather than being physically destroyed, some selected women and children—who were often regarded as spoils of war, slaves, and objects of sexual slavery—were forcibly transferred and incorporated into the Muslim community, an official governmental policy intended to erase their Armenian identity.[27]

These policies of transfer and assimilation have historical roots in the Ottoman Empire. Starting from approximately the fifteenth century, Christian boys were taken from their families, converted to Islam, and received special education in schools to serve in the Ottoman state and army. This policy, known as the *devshirme* system, comprised of conscription, followed by successful assimilation, and a new identity-formation process. The conscripted boys were either sent to palace schools to be educated as administrators, or sent to villages as agricultural laborers. In both cases, the children learned the Turkish language and Islamic traditions. Afterward, those who had been sent to villages were enlisted as soldiers in the Janissary army.[28] The age of the boys, their physical and mental health, as well as their appearance, were all important factors in the selection process.[29]

Interestingly, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople referenced the Ottoman tradition of *devshirme* as a historical background for the forced transfer of Armenian children during the Armenian Genocide.[30] During the deliberations on the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and

27 Lerna Ekmekcioglu, "A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 3 (2013): 522–53, 528; Tashjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion," 65; Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children", 211.

28 Janissary Army was an elite corps in the Ottoman Empire's Army from the late fourteenth century to 1826. The Janissary Army was originally staffed through devşirme.

29 Gülay Yılmaz, "The Devshirme System and the Levied Children of Bursa in 1603-4" *Belleten,* https://belleten.gov.tr/tam-metin/248/eng#r12, accessed June 5, 2023.

30 The Ottoman Empire developed a system of laws that recognized millets—communities based on religion. They were subject to the Sultan with some degree of autonomy in religious and social life. There were Armenian, Greek, and Jewish millets. The Armenian millet was led by the patriarchate that was established in 1461 in Constantinople. Report of Zaven Patriarch to Miss Rachel Crawdy.

Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the practice of *devshirme* was brought up by the Greek delegation to argue for the inclusion of "the forced transfer of children" in the Convention.[31]

State-run Orphanages

During the Armenian Genocide, Turkish authorities collected thousands of children and placed them in state orphanages, where their personal information was changed, they were converted to Islam, and they received a targeted education aimed at Turkifying them.[32] The Ottoman government's attempts to deal with the Armenian children in government-run orphanages were the most direct example of the state's assimilationist policies. The changing of children's names was the first step of assimilation and a new formation of identity after entering orphanages. The transferred children were given Turkish names and forbidden from calling each other by their Armenian names.

Yeranouhi Simonian was about eleven or twelve years old when transferred to Mardin Turkish orphanage, while her family was deported from Adana to a concentration camp at Ras ul Ain. Her narrative of orphanage life recounts the persistent attempts of the orphanage authorities to assimilate her and other Armenian children.[33] She was named Pehie and was forced to conform to the new surroundings. She wrote: "We all have Turkish names. In public, we were calling each other with the Turkish names, but when alone, we were using our Armenian names."[34]

Mari Grigorian, who was also eleven or twelve years old, was another female survivor from the same Mardin orphanage. She described her identity change as if "being thrown into the giant mixer, everyone should forget their identity and become a genuine Turkish citizen."[35] She was

31 Philippa Webb and Hirad Abtahi, eds., *The Genocide Convention: The Travaux Préparatoires* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), 1492–98.

32 For more about the Turkification of Armenian children in state-run orphanages see: Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, Shushan Khachatryan, and Narine Margaryan, "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages during the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2023.2237700.

33 Yeranuhi A. Simonian, Իմ Գողգոթաս [My Golgotha] (Antilias: Publishing House of the Great House of Cilicia, 1960).

34 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 27.

35 Mari Grigorian, *Ատանայէն Մարտինի թրքական որբանոցը* [From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin], AGMI archives, section 8, folder 248, no. 397, 74–5.

given the name "Ayşe." Her two sisters, Verjine and Veron, who were with her in the same orphanage, respectively became "Bedriye" and "Adile." In her memoir, Grigorian also details the changing of the Armenian children's parents' names.[36] The children were forced to remember their new Turkish names and the usage of Armenian and Armenian names was severely punished.

In an orphanage of Antoura, Karnig Panian (six years old), who was renamed Mahmud, recalls an episode when the older boys had angered their teachers and were severely beaten. At that point, the children demonstrated their understanding of the Armenian identity and resisted the forced identity change:

> One of the orphans cried: "They want to make Turks out of us! But it'll never work with me! My name isn't Mehmet!" "We won't turn into Turks!" "We won't! We won't! came the vociferous reply from others. It was an unequal battle between the administration and the students. Clearly, Jemal Pasha's plan was to Turkify us, but we were determined to resist—not out of rabid nationalism, for which we were too young, but simply because we wanted to hold onto our identities, which were all we had left."[37]

The study of the Turkish language was the next stage of the cultivation of a new identity. Children were forced to use it in their everyday routine, parallel with the restriction of the Armenian language. Again, any disobedience was subject to severe punishment. Yeranuhi Simonian wrote:

> One day our teacher has asked us [the Turkified Armenian orphans]: "Can you read and write in Armenian?" We were suspicious first, but finally gave a positive answer. She took her stick and started beating us. She was beating us right and left, without mercy.[38]

Children were given compulsory Turkish language lessons; the language was presented by orphanage teachers as an "aristocratic" one worthy of learning. Interestingly, children again understood the real motivations for their being in the orphanage and their resistance to the forced identity change was remarkable:

36 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 74–5.

37 Ahmed Jemal (Djemal) Pasha was the Naval Master, commander-in-chief of the fourth Ottoman Army and one of the main perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 82–3.

38 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 30.

> "Speak Turkish, boys. Turkish is a beautiful language," they smiled at us. Some of these teachers were young and pretty. But the orphans were aware that underneath their kindness, they were trying to destroy our very selves. Therefore, we had a natural revulsion toward them.[39]

The language requirement was one of the most difficult obstacles for the orphans to surmount. Mari Grigoryan recalls:

> As the days passed, our Turkish language classes become more and more difficult. Then, Koran classes were added to this. We have to learn the prayers by heart. It was an unattained difficulty for me. Then we started learning *namaz* rules.[40]

Survivor testimonies further reveal how religious conversion was an essential component of identity change in state-run orphanages. Children were coerced to disown their Christian religion and accept Islam. Memoirs reveal how violently this process impacted the children, who were pressured into religious conversion through both physical and psychological threats and coercion. Children were forced to do *namaz* and read the Koran.[41] Boys were forcibly circumcised, while girls' hair was cut in a special way called *zilif*.[42] Strategies of forcible religious conversion also included a strict ban on the cross and other Christian symbols and icons.

In describing an episode of forced religious conversion, Yeranuhi Simonian wrote:

> A Turkish lady, named Fatma was called to teach and lead us. She stood in front of us: we were standing in line behind her. We had to repeat what she was saying. Her first words were: "Allahu Akbar," we were seriously repeating it. But we had decided that we would address our words to our God, in Armenian. The turn of worshipping came: our girls were making the sign of the cross and praying. Fatma repeated the worshiping. The girls burst out laughing. Fatma went mad. She started threatening us: "You, khains [renegades] are not worthy of accepting hakki din [true religion], you are worth only being slaughtered."[43]

39 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura,* 89.
40 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 78–9.
41 *Namāz* are the prayers performed by Muslims.
42 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 27.
43 Simonian, *My Golgotha*, 27.

In the words of Panian:

> But the project of Turkification was reaching a new level of intensity. On a daily basis, we heard lectures about Islam, its victories, and the virtue it imparted to the faithful who followed the way of Allah. Some of the boys had succumbed to the pressure already, while the others were under constant assault from the staff and the headmaster.[44]

Some orphans, unable to resist the hardships of the orphanage life, fled. Others fled as they were unable to continue fighting for the preservation of their identity. One of the Armenian girls from the Mardin orphanage, Tigranuhi who became "Lamia," was among those who could not bear the hardships in the orphanage and decided to flee, leaving her sister in the orphanage. She married a Turkish officer. Her Armenian friends in the orphanage were shocked. As Yeranuhi Simonian put it: "I was profoundly shocked. All the relatives of that girl were massacred by the Turks. Was it worth it to become a wife of a Turkish officer for a piece of bread?"[45]

By completely erasing Armenian names, language, religion, and everything connected with the Armenian identity, as well as the compulsory imposition of a new identity through new names, language, and religious conversion, the authorities attempted to completely disconnect the children from their identity, detach them from the past, and thus facilitate Turkification.

Individual Transfers

Thousands of children were separated from their families and caravans and were placed in individual Muslim families through distribution, abduction, or purchase. The Turkish government distributed Armenian children to selected Muslim households, but children were also taken by the officials themselves. During the short stays and en route, deportation caravans were attacked by local Muslim populations who also selected and took young Armenian women and children. Children sometimes ran to local Muslims to be saved. At the same time, the escorting gendarmes were selling young Armenian deportees. Later, the purchased Armenians could be further sold to other locals (sometimes even several times).

44 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura,* 109.
45 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 36–7.

Understanding that the deportations were actually death marches, many Armenian mothers gave their children to locals in order to save their lives or sometimes they sold them to be able to feed their other children.[46] The slave trade and slave markets were also flourishing.[47] There are accounts that many Turks visited deportation convoys with doctors to select Armenians, the strongest, healthiest, and prettiest ones, for their purposes.[48]

The forcibly transferred children were exposed to exploitation and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. In the case of young women, forced marriages were practiced en masse. Like the children placed in state orphanages, those who were taken to Muslim households were also Islamized. They were similarly forced to disown their identities and assimilate into the Muslim communities. Again, the mechanism of absorption was the same—the transferred Armenians were given new names, converted to Islam, and absorbed as members of individual families. Although in some (very few) Muslim homes, children were well received and treated, in such instances, children were still forced to change their identity and assimilate into the perpetrator's group; this was, nevertheless, genocidal forced transfer.

Leon Surmelian's narrative details his experience during the Armenian Genocide and the manner in which thousands of Armenian children were separated from their parents and distributed to Muslim households. By the order of Turkish authorities, Surmelian was placed in a house with hundreds of other Armenian children who were then taken to the Armenian prelacy building in Trebizond, where they were joined by children from other places. The following day, these children were marched out of the city and the boys were separated from the women and girls, who proceeded on their march. The boys were exhibited before the local government building by the sub-governor of the city to be selected and adopted by Muslims. This is how Surmelian described the process:

> We boys were put on exhibit before the government building, guarded by a few gendarmes, and shop keepers from the town, and peasants from the surrounding countryside loitered among us, eyeing us with

46 Gzoyan, *Aleppo Rescue Home*.

47 UNOG, Classement 12, document 9711, dossier 4631.

48 Report of Leslie A. Davis, American Consul, Formerly at Harput, Turkey, on the work of the Consulate at Harput since the Beginning of the Present War (New York, 9 February 1918), in Ara Sarafian (comp.), *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide: The Central Lands* (Boston, Mass.: Armenian Review, 1995), 79.

> the shrewd appraising glances of sheep buyers. The Kaimakam, or sub governor of Jevizlik, a portly middle-aged man in a gray European suit, with a gold watch chain hanging across his ample waist, stood on the stone steps of the building and looked at us with a bored expression. Evidently, we were just another group of children to be disposed of according to the instructions of his superior, the governor-general of Trebizond. It was all a matter of official routine to him; he expressed no personal hatred toward us. This was like a slave market of captive enemy children, except that we brought no price and any Moslem could come and take any boy he wanted. There were several women among our visitors, some wearing stiff black veils, others half veiled or unveiled.[49]

On the second day, the secretary of the sub-governor's office recorded Surmelian's adoption by an irregular soldier. "'He will be a *cheta* when he grows up,' my benefactor said, putting his hand on my shoulder.[50] With repeated orders that the beggar take good care of me, he mounted his horse and rode away, to rob and kill more Armenians."[51] One of Surmelian's friends, Michael, was adopted by a coffeehouse owner; another friend, Nurikhan, was adopted by a local scribe, while another, Simon, was taken by a peasant woman.[52] Although Michael was satisfied with his master who treated him well, he still had to disassociate with Armenian boys, forget his past, and become a Turk.[53] Surmelian managed to escape from his master and was adopted by a Turk who named him "Jemal." Although the Turk's family treated Surmelian well, he wondered how they would treat him if they knew that he had not become a Turk, "and even if she [adopted mother] was a good woman, I could never forget my own mother and accept her in her place."[54]

All children adopted into Turkish families faced the dilemma of whether or not to convert to Islam, as a next step of their identity change. Some converted out of fear or out of respect for the adopted family, others tried to avoid it by all possible means. This conversion included reading the Koran, Muslim prayers, *namaz*, and, in the case of boys,

49 Leon Surmelian, *I ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1945), 111.

50 *Cheta* was the term for a soldier of the Turkish irregular forces/bands who were involved in killings and robbery during the Armenian Genocide.

51 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 116.

52 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 111–13.

53 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 115.

54 Surmelian, *I ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 119–20.

circumcision. When the next stage of the identity change came, a village *mullah* came to circumcise Leon.[55] For Leon, the news was like "slapping me on my back with his horrible witch doctor's hand." He wrote:

> I thought that once I let the *mullah* circumcise me, I could never become a Christian again, it would be the final, irrevocable act of renouncing my faith and nationality and family and Europe and civilization and everything else I cherished in my aching heart. After brooding over it for two days, I decided I would rather die than be circumcised.[56]

Leon decided to flee.

Another Armenian boy Aram, who was deported with his family, became separated from them and appeared among the Muslims. This is how Aram describes his experience of identity change:

> They called me by a Kurdish name Seito … They began to question how would the neighbors understand that I was a Muslim, so I had to learn the Muslim prayer. When I played with children, they taught me; but not knowing Turkish well, I had difficulty reciting it. The children who played with me said, "The souls of those who kill seven gavur will go to paradise and you're still a gavur, not a Muslim." Every evening they would drag me forward and force me to recite "Laa ilaaha illallaah Mohamed ar-Rasool Allah" (There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet). I had great difficulty in saying this, which would annoy them. They did this for days on end, sometimes even beating me.[57]

A year passed and according to Aram's masters, "Seito" had not yet become "a complete Muslim." Therefore, he had to be circumcised.

> They and I were dealt with together, but even with this they hadn't achieved their aim: Seito's heart wasn't disturbed—Aram's heart was full of Armenian blood. They believed that Aram was one hundred percent Muslim and had accepted "Hak din," [the true religion] but I

55 *Mullah* is an honorable title for Shia and Sunni Muslim clergy.

56 Surmelian, *I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 121–22.

57 Regina Galustyan and Robert Tatoyan (eds.), *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide, 7. Aram Mantashyan, Aram Could Not be Seito. Sokrat Mkrtchyan, Memoirs* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, 2022), 32.

> learnt the language very quickly and worked as if I was their son. I was very nimble and none of the others of my age could beat me up.[58]

In another case, an Armenian boy, Vahram, and his sister, whose parents and four other brothers and sisters were killed, were adopted by a wealthy Turkish family. Interestingly, the brother and sister developed contrary feelings towards their Turkish family. While Vahram had deep sentiments toward his new Turkish family, spending many hours with his grandfather, learning the Koran, praying and fasting, his sister hated them and blamed them for the death of her family.[59] They were well received there but had to become Turks—this was a precondition of their survival.

Thus, the methods of identity change were very similar to those in the state orphanages—changing of personal information, language, and religious conversion. Sarafian rightly argues that by participating in the forced transfer and conversions and by monitoring the faith and actions of the converted afterwards, the Muslim families became crucial agents for what amounted to a centrally organized program of forced assimilation within a wider genocidal process.[60]

Liberation and Return to Armenian Identity

On October 30, 1918, a ceasefire signed in Mudros between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain (representing the Allied powers) marked the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the collapse of the Young Turk dictatorship presented the Armenians and foreign individuals and organizations an opportunity to search for and liberate the Armenian survivors who were transferred and assimilated into the Muslim community. In accordance with the Mudros Armistice, Article 4 demanded the liberation of Armenian captives and prisoners, and the new Turkish government allowed forcibly transferred Armenians to be returned to their community.[61] It took limited steps toward the surrender of Armenian children and women found in Muslim households and state or private institutions. Some Muslims, afraid of possible punishment or due to the dire economic

58 *Aram Could Not be Seito*, 33.
59 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 15.
60 Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children," 217.
61 Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 274.

condition of the post-war period, released their Armenian captives, while others, certain that the children had already forgotten their identity, continued to keep them. Some older children fled Turkish families or institutions on their own, although some of them also returned to their Turkish families.[62] Armenian orphans also began to be collected from Turkish orphanages, Muslim homes, and institutions by Armenians.

The news of the armistice and possible liberation was received with joy and excitement. Mari Grigorian writes:

> It was the beginning of November, when we have heard the news of salvation—armistice was signed between Turkey and the Allies and that the British and French troops have captured Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Cilicia. Now the occupation of Polis (Constantinople) was a new rising sun for the Armenians. It would bring freedom, breaking the centuries-old chains of captivity.[63]

Yeranuhi Simonian presented her long-awaited liberation in the following words:

> … We were brought outside, we entered a new world, a crowd of Armenians were gathered. We took our white headscarf from our heads and threw them away; we were now Armenians and were going to our nation and church … Oh, that day, the day of freedom and cry of joy, I have never forgotten and will not, that day.[64]

Panian also expressed his feelings emotionally: "There would be no more insults, no more beatings, no more endless lessons! It was a day of celebration! … We had been saved. The Armenian orphans had been returned to their nation."[65]

After the liberation, these children had to be brought back to their Armenian identity. The older children remembered their names and the names of their parents, but some of the younger ones had trouble remembering. When it was impossible to verify the child's name, they were assigned new Armenian ones. In the words of Panian, their "Turkish names were immediately forgotten."[66] Simonian presented this as: "We entered the Armenian building [an Armenian orphanage], became Arme-

62 UNOG, Classement 12, dossier 4631, document 15100.
63 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 93.
64 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 44.
65 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 146–47.
66 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 149.

nians, have thrown off the names Emine and Pehie, that we have pronounced with a deep disgust for so many years in the grip of violence."[67]

Some of the children had forgotten how to speak and write in Armenian, others were hardly speaking. Vahram, like many child survivors, had lost his identity. After liberation, he was placed in an Armenian orphanage, relearned his mother tongue, started reading the Bible, rediscovered his roots, and was able to heal some of his emotional wounds.[68] Within four or five years, some of the transferred children had to learn the alphabet for a third time as, after liberation, they were instructed to speak Armenian. As Mari Grigoryan wrote, one of the Armenian women who came with a priest to liberate them from the Turkish orphanage, had told them: "Children from now on you will have to speak Armenian. I know it will be difficult at the beginning, but soon you will be able to remember your mother tongue and speak freely."[69]

During the next stage of returning to their Armenian identity, the liberated children were taken to the Armenian church to become Christians again. They were met with crowds of Armenians who came to welcome the "lost lambs of the nation" or search for their missing relatives. A grandmother from Kharberd found her grandchild among the liberated orphans from the Turkish Mardin orphanage. In the excitement and stress, a woman initially stood still while holding her grandchild, then she fell, madly repeating: "A whole family was massacred, only this one remains."[70]

Liberated children wrote sensitively about their first visit to the Armenian Church, which signaled their severance from Islamization and a return to their nation:

> As soon as we entered, everyone burst into tears and were crying bitterly, remembering our past and sunny childhood, which was unfortunately lost on the day of disaster [the genocide]. We were happy that passing through the valleys of death and paths of deprivation, we were able to reach these days of hope. Our tortured bodies and hearts needed purity and only church could clean us by its holy water and blessed myrrh.[71]

Simonian presents her feelings in similar words:

67 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 44.
68 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 16.
69 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 94–5.
70 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 44.
71 Grigorian, *From Adana to the Turkish Orphanage of Mardin*, 94–5.

> We entered a church, which was full of people. … We feel like in heaven. Our childhood once again was returned to us with its sweet memories. We were longing for our church, our candles, incense, prayers and priests for years. We also prayed. We confessed to receive a holy communion next day. To become a new Christian, a new Armenian …[72]

Aram, who was not rescued but was able to escape, described his feelings in the following words:

> The Turkish slave-owners' efforts and aims were useless; they couldn't break Aram's will and turn him into a real Seito. Aram couldn't deny his beloved Armenian nation and become Seito; I wasn't frightened, my will was strong and I was able to withstand every kind of ferocious beating, tortures and suffering from a very early age, until I set foot on my own, wonderful, fatherland's soil and completely became free.[73]

It was soon evident that the methods of assimilation were quite successful in changing the identities of many of the affected children, who were later liberated; it often took considerable time and effort to revive their sense of Armenian identity. This was especially evident among the youngest, as some were infants when abducted by the Turks. Some children suffered great physical and psychological trauma, leading to cases of amnesia or repression. Others were old enough during the deportations and remembered being Armenian but, nonetheless, insisted on retaining their Turkish identity because of the trauma and suffering they experienced merely for being Armenian. Having been raised as "genuine Turks" and taught to hate their identity, many children vigorously resisted efforts to liberate them and rejected their Armenian identity long after being rescued. In some cases, it took three to four months to help lead children back to their cultural, religious, and national identity.[74] And while some were liberated and regained their Armenian identity, thousands remained trapped in their newly constructed identities and were lost to the Armenian nation.

For some of the liberated children, it took forty to eighty years to dare to speak about this forced identity change, as the memoirs were written

72 Simonian, *My Golgotha,* 44.

73 *Aram Could Not be Seito*, 61.

74 Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, and Shushan Khachatryan, "Reclaiming Children after the Armenian Genocide: Neutral House in Istanbul," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 33, no. 3 (2019): 395–411.

in late adulthood or at an advanced age. In all these memoirs, the children's struggle against Turkification is emphasized. It is difficult to say whether they were honest in their memoirs about secretly fighting to maintain their Armenian identity despite being physically and spiritually Turkified or if this perception developed during the post-genocidal years, as in the case of Vahram, who sometimes after liberation felt ashamed for being Turkified. However, they do seem authentic, at least when writing their stories of agony and survival.

Conclusion

Forcible child transfer is one of the five genocidal acts listed in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It forbids forcibly transferring children from one group to another with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Operating in the nexus of cultural and biological genocides, forcible child transfer has a unique application in comparison with other genocidal acts as it forms a new identity for a targeted group through the destruction of its former one. The forced transfer and assimilation of Armenian children into the Muslim community was a genocidal act as defined by the Genocide Convention.

The idea of forced transfer and assimilation is also very closely related to Raphael Lemkin's understanding of genocide. According to Lemkin, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a group, but rather a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of the targeted group, which is aimed at annihilating these groups. Accordingly, the concept of genocide must be understood beyond the immediate extermination of the protected group to include nonlethal acts that target the group's "essential foundations" and eradicate the group's collective identity over time.[75] This could be achieved by preventing the group's capacity to have children and by abducting children at an early age to prevent the group from raising their own children as transgenerational heirs to their collective identity.[76]

75 Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 80.

76 Douglas Irvin Erickson, *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 154; John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 69–70.

Lemkin further observed that genocide is a two-phase process—the destruction of the national pattern of the targeted group and the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. Lemkin explained that the terms "Germanization" or "Italianization" are used to signify the imposition of one stronger nation's national pattern upon another nation/group. However, this does not fully transfer to the concept of genocide, as by referring mainly to the cultural, economic, and social aspects of the notion, biological consequences, such as physical decline and even destruction of the targeted populations, are ignored. Thus, according to Lemkin, it is not enough to impose a national pattern of the oppressor on the targeted group—the targeted group should also be attacked in a physical sense, and be removed and supplanted by the population of the oppressor nation.[77]

During the Armenian Genocide, which was accompanied by massacres and death marches, some selected members of the Armenian community—young women and children—were forcibly transferred and assimilated. Thus, in addition to physical destruction of Armenians, the Young Turk government imposed its national pattern on the target population. As well as being violently and systematically suppressed, changes occurred to the Christian religion, Armenian language, culture, and even the family names of the survivors, whether in private homes, government-run orphanages, or the public sphere, leaving only the biological "raw material" to be methodically Turkified.[78]

Based on the testimonies of survivors of the forced transfer, this article reconstructed the process of transfer and assimilation carried out in state institutions and individual households, which included changing personal information, language, and religion. It also showcased the varied attitudes of children to the forced and mainly violent identity change. Their liberation and return to the Armenian identity was also discussed in the article—a process that mirrored the methods of assimilation: a return to their old or new Armenian names, learning or re-learning their mother tongue, and being baptized or re-baptized in the Armenian Church, a process that was mostly long-awaited and praised by the liberated children.

American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), Raphael Lemkin Collection, Box 7, doc. 3, Correspondence with Edit Besser, 5.

77 Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79–80.

78 Matthias Bjornlund, "'A Fate Worse than Dying': Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide," in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 16–58, 37.

Did the Turks succeed or fail in the genocidal transfer of Armenian children? The answer is both. Some were liberated and reclaimed, others remained and replenished Turkish society. Those who returned to the Armenian society were deeply impacted and suffered as a result of the identity changes, questioning their past and the future. As Karnik Panian poignantly put it:

> We orphans were remnants of a vast nation. We constituted the new generation of Armenians. … Many of my family members had died in the concentration camp. What had happened to the rest? Where were they now? I wondered, too, about my fate and my old home. Would I ever get back to Gurin? Would our house still be standing? Would the door be open or locked? I forced myself out of these daydreams. My friends were playing nearby. I joined their games, but my mind kept drifting back into the past and forward into the future. Would I really be back home soon, in the bosom of what remained of my family?[79]

79 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*, 153–54.