



# From Orphan to Citizen

**The Debate over Education at the City of Orphans**  
Alexandropol/Leninakan, 1919–1929

**Thursday**

**March 16, 2017**

**7:00–9:00PM**

**East Conference Room  
Rackham Graduate School  
915 E. Washington St.**

**Nora Nercessian**

Retired Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Harvard University; Assistant Dean and Associate Dean of Administration, Harvard Medical School; Advisor to the Board, The Children of Armenia Fund (COAF). She is the author of *Worthy of the Honor* (1995) and *Against All Odds* (2004).

As Russian Armenia became host to thousands of orphans who crossed the border from Western Armenia, the Near East Relief (NER) offered to take on the responsibility for their needs, and by 1921, soon after Armenia had been Sovietized, it had collected most of the children in Alexandropol. There, 20,000 to 25,000 children resided in former Russian barracks that had once housed the Tsar's Cossack, Dragoon and Artillery Regiments.

The City of Orphans, as the barracks were known in the West, was dubbed The Largest Orphanage in the World, whose orphan population constituted more than 50% of the total number of Armenian orphans NER cared for in the region. In sheer numbers, they represented a significant percentage of the future citizens of Soviet Armenia, which they were to rebuild once they left the orphanage, armed with the education and skills learned under NER's tutelage.

Yet while NER and Soviet authorities extended courtesies to each other, especially in the first half of the 1920s, they disagreed increasingly and more sharply after Lenin's death on the type of citizen that should emerge from the doors of the City of Orphans and on the agency that would control their rite of passage from orphan to citizen. Would, or could, NER educate them as the bearers of an Armenian legacy redefined through Bolshevism, proudly marching toward a socialist state, or, were they to be educated as the loyal harbingers of American values capable of leading Armenia toward a progressive American way of life?

Photo: Rockefeller Archive Center, The Near East Foundation Collection, Photos, Box 138

