

Review of Ofer Nordheimer Nur, *Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism*, Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press 2014, xxiv + 220 pp., ISBN 978-19-36-23585-8

BY BJÖRN KRONDORFER, NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY, USA

This book is about a small but influential, independent Zionist youth movement in the early 20th century, the Hashomer Hatzai, literally translated as 'The Young Watchman'. Its history is traced from the beginnings in Galicia in 1916 and the articulation of the group's ideals in Vienna during the First World War to the eventual move to Palestine in 1920 in response to the now defunct Habsburg empire (2014: xxii) and Europe's increasing anti-Semitism. Of the about 600 arriving Hashomer Hatzai members in Palestine, about 30 of them – mostly young men under the age of 25 – founded the community Bitania Ilit. They experimented with living together communally, testing their ideas about new social relations as part of a national awakening and under the harsh conditions of the new land. Short-lived as this social experiment was (Bitania Ilit lasted only eight months), it generated a powerful myth among youth about the possibility of an ideal, future-oriented, socialist collective – a kibbutz life that valued organic bonds over individualistic needs.

Ofer Nur analyses the textual materials left by Hashomer Hatzai through the lens of gender. Focusing on the formation of and contestation over Jewish male identity, he shows how Hashomer Hatzai was shaped by emerging Zionist ideals as well as the idealism of non-Jewish German youth movements and, to a lesser extent, the Polish Boy Scouts, themselves modelled after the scouts in England founded by the British military hero Baden-Powell. Even so Hashomer Hatzai was not an exclusively male homosocial group, its intellectual leaders spoke of creating an 'alternative, erotic community' (2014: 57) that was to put into practice the social fantasies of young Jewish men. It was a fantasy insofar as it expressed the yearnings of a generation of young men who, steeped in the *Zeitgeist* of the early 20th century, imagined a community that starkly differed from

the political realities of their time. They envisioned a world without the continuous confrontation of anti-Semitic humiliations, a world without the exilic experience of powerlessness, and a world away from the chaos and trauma of the Great War of 1914.

Members of the Hashomer Hatzai, according to Nur, followed not so much a dream inspired by the 'messianic trope' (2014: 66) of redemption – whether religious or secular – rather than a vision more closely aligned to ancient Greek mythology and to a blend of contemporary anarchic, psychotherapeutic and neo-romantic ideas about communal life. Their vision, Nur argues, can be best summed up as a double move: a 'quest for Eros' (2014: 66) and a deeply embedded sense of the 'tragic condition' (2014: 71).

Chapter 1 follows the group's origins in Galicia. Living among a majority Polish population but under the political entity of the Habsburg monarchy, young Jews sensed opportunities for a cultural opening after their political emancipation in the 1870s. Their embrace of Zionism as a national consciousness, not yet fixed to a particular territory, led to intergenerational tensions: it questioned the religious-orthodox acceptance of the Jewish Diaspora. Intellectual leaders of Hashomer Hatzai lamented the unhealthy diasporic life and the hyper-individualism and over-intellectualism of modern European civilization that left young Jews without vitality and national consciousness. These laments mirrored, ironically, the anti-Semitic prejudices of the time hauled against them, identifying Jews with the unmanly qualities of idle intellectuals who pursued individual gains over the common good of a unified people. Hashomer Hatzai's efforts of countering such negative portrayals lay 'the foundation [...] for a new masculinity, a new invigorated [Jewish] man' (2014: 22). The group was eager to 'transform its young members into "whole human beings" ' who were 'physically, psychologically and emotionally ... balanced' (2014: 27).

Hashomer Hatzai, however, did not follow the lead of some of the non-Jewish German and Austrian youth movements that eschewed urban modernity by identifying with a *völkisch* past. Rather, it modelled itself after youth groups from the *Jugendkulturbewegung* that thrived in metropolitan settings, like Vienna and Berlin, who engaged in radical debates about education, religion, family, politics and sexuality. Chapter 2 introduces Hashomer Hatzai's changing attitudes toward sexuality, leaving behind a more sex-repressive culture in favour of a sex affirmative stance. Yet, it was not free love that their literature advocated but the productive sublimation of sexuality. Such sublimation, supposedly, led to Eros, the essential building block for their imagined community. Familiar with Sigmund Freud's work on the repression of sexuality, the group saw sublimation as a way to 'socially harness Eros [...] for personal and social change' (2014: 63, italics original).

Chapter 3 unfolds the 'tragic condition' that members of Hashomer Hatzai embraced. They perceived a world without God, leaving humans in charge in the face of death and despair. Therefore, men – and we can use the word here in its gendered meaning – need to fully 'plunge into history', commit to 'total values' and heroically endure the torments of 'never-ending inner turmoil' (2014: 71). By adopting a tragic vision, members of the youth movement were able to transform the real despair they experienced in pre-1914 and post-1918 central Europe into a 'revolutionary spirit' (2014: 78).

The Nietzschean spirit that speaks through these ideals is a topic taken up in Chapter 4. Nur shows in more detail how certain Dionysian and irrational

elements were adopted in the writings of Hashomer Hatzai. Objecting to 'civilization' in favour of 'culture' and expressing disdain for party politics and bourgeois family, the group was receptive to myth and symbols which, in their view, demonstrated the vitality of the tragic hero. Interestingly, this included a positive reception of Jesus, who was seen as a 'Jew who rebelled against the rabbis' and as 'leader of true religiosity' (2014: 130f), a topic taken up in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 introduces the German term *Gemeinschaft*, a seminal concept at the turn of the century that made its way also into Jewish thought through people like Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer. *Gemeinschaft* refers to community as a living organism, distinct from the political structure of organised society. Such a community could co-exist, or exist covertly, alongside society. Hashomer Hatzai conceived of itself as such a counter-cultural, anti-authoritarian community. The group was fond of Buber's notion of a subterranean Judaism that existed alongside normative rabbinic Judaism. Subterranean Judaism, according to this notion, revealed itself in specific mystic, redemptive and ecstatic figures, such as the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidism) or even the Jew Jesus. Hashomer Hatzai members, in their 'collective fantasy', imagined that they themselves constituted a 'last link in the chain of subterranean Judaism', thus performing a kind of secular 'imagined religiosity' (2014: 134f).

Chapter 6 introduces aspects of the actual manifestation of *eda*, a Hebrew word that sums up the kind of community, *Bund*, or *Gemeinschaft*, which this male-spirited community tried to erect. Particular attention is paid to the group's public 'confessions' and 'dancing' at Bitania Ilit that were to consolidate the bonds in the *eda*. The nocturnal confessions around campfires – supposed to create a collective soul in which private secrets had no place – failed. Dancing, on the other hand, seemed to have been welcome as Dionysian release. True dancing, however, was seen again in the light of sublimation: it ought to generate communal Eros, not sexual licentiousness. Personal testimonies also spoke of ecstatic, ritual fusion with the land as an erotic object: 'I celebrated my wedding with the land. I clung to it, ate it, and was drunk with it' (2014: 147).

Eros is also the subject of Chapter 7, though here we see possible limits to its containment in sublimation. Homoerotic sentiments expressed in the publications of Hashomer Hatzai leaders are analysed against the backdrop of the homoerotic writing of Hans Blüher, himself a fervent German nationalist, anti-Semite and anti-feminist, who imagined the German youth movement as an exclusive band of brothers. Chapter 8, finally, argues that the male fantasy of hyper-virile tragic heroes bound together in solidarity in a (homo)erotic community was not stable. Instead, it was disrupted by the persistent presence of women in the movement as well as by masculine ideals that called for more emotionally gentle and sensitive men. According to Nur, the required public confessions practiced in the short-lived community of Bitania Ilit signalled one instance that countered the tragic vision of masculinity. Nur concludes with a grand gesture: 'Ironically, the male fantasy that fuelled a drive to rehabilitate the Jew in the Diaspora into a heroic man brought about [...] a thoughtful, sensitive, at times very visibly soft masculinity' (2014: 192). This might be true, but Nur simply does not provide sufficient evidence from his sources to make a persuasive case for such a final claim.

Eros and Tragedy is an important addition to the literature on Jewish masculinity available in English. It reveals the deeply embedded male genderedness of

early Zionist discourse. Perhaps more importantly, it points to how profoundly discussions about modern Jewish masculinity before the Holocaust and before the creation of the State of Israel were shaped by images and prejudices of the surrounding hegemonic culture – a culture that celebrated national and manly vigour, a culture also that denied Jewish men’s access to these acclaimed values while simultaneously disdaining Jews for not embodying these virtues. Hashomer Hatzai tried in its own ways to negotiate this field of landmines of contested and denied masculinities.