

The Russian Terror in Palestine

Bar Giora and Ha-shomer Associations, 1907-1920

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Introduction

On April 12, 1909, the founders of 'Bar Giora' gathered in Kfar Tavor in the Lower Galilee with the intention of expanding the ranks of their secret organization that had been established a year and a half earlier, and to set up a new and legal organization called *Ha-shomer* (The Guardian). At that same meeting it was decided that the new association would absorb into its ranks new members who had borne the burden of guarding and enhance its influence over the renewed settlement in Palestine. For this purpose they wished to create among the settlements the appropriate conditions for the development of the Hebrew guard and to provide him with the necessary training that would allow him to cope with the expected challenges. From the moment it was established, the *Ha-shomer* achieved considerable success and within three years had managed to gain a foothold in the colonies. During the peak period of this association there were no more than three hundred hired guards and a limited number of permanent members. They replaced the Arab guards in the colonies and took up their positions in vineyards, fields, and wherever they were needed. In doing so they meant to reduce dependence on the local population and take responsibility for the fate of the Yishuv.

The story of the *Ha-shomer* Association and of the Jewish settlement guards became one of the outstanding symbols of Zionist historiography and of the renewal of Jewish settlement in Palestine. The idea of 'kibush ha-shmira' (conquest of guardianship) was so revolutionary that some historians regarded the association as no less than the first core-group of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its members as the first soldiers of the yet unborn state.¹ The history of the *Bar Giora* and *Ha-shomer* associations, the struggle

¹ See: Mordechai Naor, "Hasunim, Amitzei Lev ve-Hadurei Hakarah Tzionit: Me'ah Shana le-Hakamat Bar Giora ve-Ha-shomer" [Stalwart, Brave-hearted, and Instilled with Zionist Zeal: The Hundredth Year of the Establishment of Bar Giora and Ha-shomet], *Et-Mol* 198, Adar II, 5748 (March 2008): 4. See also: Yaacov Goldstein, *Ba-derech el ha-Ya'ad: 'Bar Giora' ve-'Ha-shomer', 1907-1935* [On the Road to the Goal: Bar Giora and Ha-shomer, 1907-1935] (Tel Aviv, 1994): 195. Also see the translation into English of Goldstein's book: Yaacov N. Goldstein, *From Fighters to Soldiers: How the Israeli Defense Forces Began* (Portland, 1998).

over the conquest of guardianship and dismissal of Arab guards from the colonies turned over the years into one of the great legends of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. For the first time after centuries of exile, a handful of Jewish pioneers took upon themselves the responsibility for their fate, converting passivity into activity without fear of confrontation with the local population even if it entailed the loss of life. The mystic link between blood, earth and redemption became the formative ethos in the Yishuv that was retained long years after the *Ha-shomer* Association had disbanded and its members distanced from the centers of political decision-making.

The *Ha-shomer* Association quite naturally gained a place of honor in the historiography of the Yishuv in general and of pioneer society in particular. Many articles and books were written about its activities and its stubborn struggle over the conquest of guardianship, most of them glorifying its members and giving high praise to their contribution in consolidating the Yishuv.² Anyone who studies the primary sources that were at the disposal of researchers engaged in the history of the legendary association will find that most of these researchers based themselves on the memoirs of members published long after the association had disbanded. The three editions of *Kovtzei ha-Shomer* [Ha-shomer Anthologies] that appeared during the 1930s and 1940s together with *Sefer Ha-shomer: Divrei Haverim* [The Book of Ha-shomer: Tales of the Members] and *Sefer Toldot ha-Ha-haganah* [History of the Hagana] that appeared during the 1950s,

² See the following: *Sefer Toldot ha-Ha-haganah* [History of the Hagana], Vol. 1: *Me-hitgonenut le-Ha-haganah* [From Resistance to Defense] (Tel Aviv, 1956): 193-274; Uziel Lev, *Bar Giora ve-Ha-shomer: Me-ra'ayon Bithoni le-Irgun Bithoni (1907-1914)* [Bar Giora and Ha-shomer: From a Security Idea to a Security Organization (1907-1914)] (Tel Aviv, 1985); Shlomo Sheba, *Shevet No'azim* [Tribe of the Intrepids] (Merhavia, 1969); Yaacov Goldstein, *Ba-derech el ha-Ya'ad: 'Bar Giora' ve-'Ha-shomer', 1907-1935* [On the Road to the Goal: Bar Giora and Ha-shomer, 1907-1935] (Tel Aviv, 1994). Besides these books, many articles and chapters in books were written that cannot all be mentioned. I shall therefore refer to the more prominent among them: Zvi Rosenstein, *Toldot Tnu'at ha-Po'alim be-Eretz Yisrael* [History of the Workers Movement in the Land of Israel] (Tel Aviv, 1956): 111-120; Moshe Braslavsky, *Tnu'at ha-Po'alim ha-Eretz Yisraelit* [The Land of Israel Workers Movement], Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1967): 88-94; David Kal'i, *Ha-aliya ha-Shniya* [The Second Aliya] (Tel Aviv, 1946): 77-80; Mordechai Naor, "Ha-shomer – ha-Mitos Nolad Kvar ba-Aliya ha-Shniya" [Ha-shomer – The Myth was Already Born in the Second Aliya], in: *Ha'aliya ha-Shniya 1903-1914* (Jerusalem, 1984): 101-110; and more recently, Mordechai Naor, See above note 1; See also: Yaacov Goldstein, *Hitgonenut, ha-Shmira, ve-Irgunei 'Bar Giora' ve-'Ha-shomer' ba-Aliya ha-Shniya*, I. Bartal (ed), *Ha-aliya Ha-shniya: Mekhkarim* [the Second Aliya: Studies], (Jerusalem 1998): 435-481.

were almost the sole source for understanding the methods used by the Ha-shomer Association during the period of the Second Aliya.³

The reason for the paucity of primary documents and sources lies in the disappearance of the *Ha-shomer* archive during the First World War. When war broke out the *Ha-shomer* Association was outlawed. Its members were forced to leave off guarding the Jewish colonies and most of them assembled together at Tel Adash in the Jezreel Valley, bringing with them the archive of the association. After exposure of the Nili spy network and because of the justified fears of the members that Turkish soldiers would come in search of incriminating documents, it was decided to burn the archive. The documents that were not burned were buried in Poriah, and until today no one knows exactly where.⁴ Nothing was preserved of the protocols of the annual meetings, of the ledgers, of the guarded districts and the correspondence. Many questions are still unresolved, and for lack of the original archive more remains concealed than revealed.

In view of the central position of the *Ha-shomer* Association in the Zionist historiography, the question arises how historians could write its history in the absence of primary documents and sources and succeed in telling the story of its members in Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century. How could a comprehensive study be made of the association based on the memoirs of members written more than fifteen years after its dissolution? This methodological problem was hardly ever discussed and the memoirs of the *Ha-shomer* veterans were accepted almost unchallenged. The picture that is therefore given of the association is one-sided and does not allow for critical examination of the memoirs of its founders recorded more than thirty years after the founding of the Bar Giora association in September 1907.

In this article I intend to argue that the members of the *Ha-shomer* Association imported into Palestine those patterns of terrorist behavior that characterized the Russian revolutionaries at the beginning of the 20th century. Their attitude towards the native Arabs and their colonists employers was influenced by their activities in the underground

³ See: *Kovetz ha-Shomer* [Ha-shomer Anthology] (Tel Aviv, 1937, 1938, and 1947). See also: *Sefer Ha-shomer: Divrei Haverim* [The Ha-shomer Book: Tales of the Members] (Tel Aviv, 1957).

⁴ On the disappearance of the Ha-shomer archive, see: Nakdimon Rogel, "Ma Karah le-Archion 'Ha-shomer'?" [What has happened to the Ha-shomer Archive?], *Archion: Mikra'ot le-Archionut vele-Te'ud*, 6 (1993): 47-51. On the attempts to find it just before the writing of the *History of the Hagana*, see the Hagana Archive, Section 124, file 21.

socialist cells in the Czarist Empire and their participation in self defense during the period of the pogroms. In order to prove my argument the article will examine two historical events concerning the history of the *Ha-shomer* Association: the Zarnooga incident after which the *Ha-shomer* people were expelled from the Rehovot colony in 1913, and the strike in Sejera and the struggle over Jewish work between the *Ha-shomer* Association and the *Neta'im* Company. These two incidents, although unconnected with each other and that took place at different times, indicate the same type of behavior of *Ha-shomer* members at the moment when a dispute arises between them and their employers.