Gay Identity, Same-Sex Relationships, and Military Service

Elderly Gay Men in Israel Recall Their Experiences in the IDF, 1948–1977

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Abstract

This article deals with the history of military service for gay men in the Israeli army (Israel Defense Forces, IDF), during the years 1948 to the mid-1970s. It is based primarily on the oral testimonies of thirty-two Israeli gay men born between 1924–1948, juxtaposed with historical sources such as newspaper articles, court documents, and written IDF guidelines. Through these, we will examine popular conceptions and understandings of deviant sexuality in the IDF between the 1950s and the 1970s, and in Israel in general. We will explore the question of homosexuals’ enrolment in the IDF and related IDF policies throughout the years, as well as various strategies adopted by homosexuals in Israel to negotiate their sexuality during their service. Ours is the first study on real-life experiences of gays who served their military duty during the early decades of the IDF.

Keywords

Israel – gay men – homosexuals’ military service – Israel Defense Forces – sexual behaviour – masculinity
Introduction

This article examines the experiences of gay men who served in the Israeli army (Israeli Defense Forces, IDF,) from 1948, when it was created with the establishment of the State of Israel, until the mid-1970s. We conducted open-ended interviews with thirty-two gay men born between 1924 and 1948. The interviews covered the whole lives of our respondents, but our focus is on the parts of their life-stories that referred to their military service. Most of the interviewees reported that military service was highly significant within their life-narratives as gay men. Their stories may contribute to a better understanding of the interface between sexuality, gender performance, and army service during a historical period in which sexual orientation was not yet explicitly discussed in either the personal or the public arena. Ours is the first study on real-life experiences of gays who served their military duty during the early decades of the IDF. Previous studies focused on archival documents\(^1\) and on the life experiences of gays who served in the IDF during the 1980s and 1990s,\(^2\) and on the change in IDF policies towards lesbians and gays that took place during the 1990s.\(^3\)

We begin with a brief history of Israeli society and its armed forces and then turn to a description of the shifting legal and social approaches towards homosexuality during the first decades after Israeli independence. Following these introductory sections, we summarize what is known to date on the official stand of the IDF towards homosexuality, emphasizing the lack of corroborated information on official policies and unofficial practices. The following section describes the study and the interviews used for the article.

The main part of the article consists of key themes relating to military service as they appear in our interviews. There are two sections in this part. First, we present the motivation of interviewees to serve, their knowledge about IDF treatment of homosexuals, cases of maltreatment, and the anxiety of being exposed. Our findings show that virtually all interviewees were willing to serve

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1 Reuven Gal, “Gays in the Military: Policy and Practice in the Israeli Defense Forces”, in Gays and Lesbians in the Military: Issues, Concerns and Contrasts, eds. Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley (New York, 1994); Aeyal Gross, “Sexuality, Masculinity, Military, and Citizenship: The Service of Gays and Lesbians in the Israeli Army in Comparative Perspective”, Plilim (9) (2000): 95-183.
2 Danny Kaplan, Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units (New York, 2002).
3 Aaron Belkin and Melissa Levitt, “Homosexuality and the Israel Defense Forces: Did Lifting the Gay Ban Undermine Military Performance?”, Armed Forces and Society 27 (4) (2001): 541-565; Yagil Levy, “A Liberal Army in a Conservative Society: The Paradox of Homosexuals’ Service in the IDF”, in In the Name of Security: The Sociology of Peace and War in Israel in Changing Times, eds. Majid Al-Haj and Uri Ben-Eliezer (Haifa, 2003), 241–254.
and served fully and successfully. A few had heard rumors about declaring one’s homosexuality as a way out of service, but none considered this a viable or desirable possibility. One man was afraid of being rejected due to his attraction to men, but was recruited with no difficulty. Two men were explicitly interrogated about their homosexuality; in both cases, ties with foreign diplomats were involved. Both soldiers continued their service as normal following the interrogation. Another man reported that questions about sexual contact with men were asked in screening exams for the Naval Academy. He was certain that homosexuals were not accepted to the Academy. There was only one case of a soldier who suffered sexual harassment when his homosexuality became known. He was the only one who exploited, toward the very end of his service, the option of using his homosexuality to get an early discharge. Finally, only the youngest interviewees reported deep anxiety about exposure as homosexuals. We suggest that this is related to the growing stigma associated with homosexuality during the 1960s.

A separate section deals with sexual behavior of interviewees during their service on and off army grounds. This section underlines the variety of patterns practiced by our informants. There were a few stories about rampant same-sex sex during the mid-1950s and a “gay ring” within the Air Force Headquarters in Tel Aviv. Most interviewees preferred separating their sexual life from the army, while others searched clandestinely for sexual and romantic mates within their bases. Due to encounters with soldiers who had already adopted gay identity, a few interviewees experienced their first sexual contacts and love with other men in the army. Other interviewees’ early sense of “being different” ripened, in the army, into an understanding that they were gay. In the last section, we summarize our findings and discuss their significance.

The Context: Israel and its Armed Forces

Israel was established as a Jewish state in May 1948, following roughly seventy years of Zionist settlement in Palestine and intensifying conflict with the indigenous Arab population. The IDF was officially established on the day of independence by uniting all of the previously underground Jewish militias under a single command. The IDF was immediately engaged in warfare with armies of the neighbouring countries and the continued fighting with the Arab population. The Israeli-Arab conflict has persisted continuously since, although peace agreements were signed with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. Since the 1967 War, the IDF has been the governing entity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It
governed the Golan Heights until Israeli law was extended to the Golan in 1981, and the Sinai Peninsula until Egypt regained control of the area in 1982.

Due, in part, to these continuous and constant security issues, the IDF has become a central force within Israeli society. Military service is venerated, high-ranking officers are held in esteem, and the army holds substantial political power.4 Most Jewish men and women (as well as Druze men) are required to join the IDF for two to three years when they are eighteen years old (the exact period has changed over the years). Although social stratification is reflected within the IDF,5 the relative inclusiveness of the institution has made it a “melting pot” in which Jews and Druze from various social strata have had significant encounters. Due to the high esteem in Israeli society for military service, those evading service suffer severe informal and formal sanctions, and many individuals fight for the “right” to be drafted even when the army disqualifies them. Service in combat units, and especially in elite units, carries more prestige than in non-combat positions, but all soldiers receive social approbation. In recent years, the centrality of the army in Israeli society has been challenged to some extent,6 but during the period of interest of this study – roughly the first two decades after the formation of Israel – the IDF was broadly esteemed by the Jewish population, and the pressure to serve, especially on men, was intense. We suggest that this profound pressure placed army service at a crucial junction within gay narratives of the time, from which the lines of the complex relationships between masculinity, nationalism, and homosexuality radiate.

**Discourse on Same-Sex Sexuality in Israel**

Male same-sex sex has been practiced for time immemorial across societies, but not until recently was it perceived as being an inherent trait distinguishing

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4 Uri Ben-Eliezer, *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism* (Oakland, CA, 2019); Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak, eds., *Militarism and Israeli Society* (Bloomington, IN, 2010).

5 Orna Sasson-Levy, “Military, Masculinity, and Citizenship: Tensions and Contradictions in the Experience of Blue-Collar Soldiers”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10 (3) (2003): 319–45; Levy, Yagil. “Militarizing Inequality: A Conceptual Framework”, *Theory and Society* 27 (6) (1998): 873–904.

6 Yagil Levy, “Military-Society Relations: The Demise of the ‘People’s Army’”, in *Israel Since 1980*, eds. Guy Ben-Porath, Yagil Levy, Shlomo Mizrahi, Arye Naor and Erez Tzafadia (New York, 2008), 117–145; Yagil Levy, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Noa Harel, “From ‘Obligatory Militarism’ to ‘Contractual Militarism’: Competing Models of Citizenship”, *Israel Studies* 12 (1) (2007): 127–148.
a specific group of “homosexuals,” from other, “normal” men. Instead, it was considered “ill-mannered” behaviour, occasionally practiced by men due to personal whims, lack of female sexual partners, and specific conditions such as prison or boarding schools.7 Among Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman empire, it was pervasive enough for rabbinical authorities to recommend not leaving two unmarried Jewish men unobserved due to the high likelihood that they would seek sexual gratification in each other.8

During the 1860s, Ottoman authorities remodelled the legal system of the empire on the basis of the Napoleonic Code. This reform decriminalized sodomy, and thus male same-sex was legal in Palestine when Zionist settlement began in the late nineteenth century.9 During the British Mandate period (1920–1947), new theories of sexuality reached Palestine through physicians, psychologists, and other educated elites exposed to contemporary discourse in Central and Western Europe.10 This new knowledge spread to some professional sectors within the Zionist society in Palestine, but most people continued to think about male same-sex sex as a bad-mannered practice committed by licentious men under certain circumstances.11 In 1936, the British Mandatory authorities introduced a new penal code in Palestine that included an anti-sodomy statute, but only minor attempts to enforce it were made, and it did not seem to have a major effect on actual sexual behaviour at the time.12

In the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli newspapers began reporting about homosexuals and lesbians abroad. During this period, the major dailies with local desks in London, Paris, and New York informed the Israeli public about gay and lesbian writers, actors, and artists, and carried reviews of books, movies, and theatre shows that included gay and lesbian themes. Gay themes in

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7 David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL, 2002); Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity* (London, 1991).
8 Yaron Ben-Naeh, “Moshko the Jew and His Gay Friends: Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Ottoman Jewish Society”, *Journal of Early Modern History* 9 (1–2) (2005): 79–105.
9 Aijaz Ahmed, “Tanzimat: A Brief Outlook of Secular Reforms in the Ottoman Empire”, *VIFAST Transactions on Islamic Research* 8 (1) (2020): 113–118.
10 Ofri Ilany, “An Oriental Vice”: Representations of Sodomy in Early Zionist Discourse”, in *National Politics and Sexuality in Transregional Perspective: The Homophobic Argument*, eds. Achim Rohde, Christina von Braun, and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (London, 2017), 107–120; Andreas Krass, Moshe Sluhovsky, and Yuval Yonay, eds., *Queer Jewish Lives between Central Europe and Mandatory Palestine* (Bielefeld, 2021).
11 Yuval Yonay, “It Is Not Allowed to be Homosexual: How Gays and Newspapers Thought and Wrote on the Law that ‘Proscribed Homosexuality’”, in *LGBT Rights in Israel*, eds. Alon Harel, Yaniv Lushinsky, and Einav Morgenstern (Jerusalem, 2016), 921–970.
12 Orna Alyagon Darr, *Plausible Crime Stories: The Legal History of Sexual Offences in Mandate Palestine* (Cambridge, 2018).
foreign movies screened in Israel and in Hebrew reproductions of foreign theatre plays were discussed by the Israeli press. Israeli newspapers of the time covered a range of stories about homosexuality from the frequency of sexual activity between men as documented in the Kinsey Report\textsuperscript{13} to the sacking of homosexual workers from government positions in the United States, and the exposure of homosexual spies for the USSR in Britain; to the controversy in England following the Wolfenden Commission in 1954 and the publication of its report in 1957 regarding the decriminalization of sodomy. Some sympathy for gay and lesbian characters was expressed, but the issues were generally deemed “foreign” and “exotic”\textsuperscript{14}. The reports, however, functioned as a gateway for the Israeli public to the modern conceptualization of binary sexualities, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Israeli readers gradually adopted the view that homosexuality was not a kind of rare disease but rather a type of sexuality that characterized a substantial minority of people who were “like that” not by choice but by nature\textsuperscript{15}.

During the 1960s, Israeli newspapers and magazines turned their gaze inward, and reports about Israeli gays and lesbians became more frequent. Knowledge regarding the ubiquity of homosexuals and lesbians alongside the negative image that was commonly spread by the mass media about them generated new practices of discrimination and violence. Hooligans and policemen attacked gays in cruising parks, gays were fired from their jobs, and “homo” became the ultimate slur and tease used throughout Israeli society by boys and youngsters\textsuperscript{16}. In 1971, a proposal to abolish the anti-sodomy law was introduced for the first time – and rejected by a large majority – in the Knesset (Israeli parliament). Only in 1988, as part of a wider reform of the Israeli Criminal Code and after several other failed attempts, was the anti-sodomy clause struck from the books. The abolition of this statute ushered in a new period of wider recognition of same-sex couples and joint parenthood, though to this day same-sex marriage is still not recognized by the state, same-sex couples are barred from adoption, and surrogacy for gay couples became legal in Israel only as recently as 2022\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{13} Published in 1948 by Alfred Kinsey and his colleague, this report was the first large-scale survey of male sexual behaviour. It was followed in 1953 with a similar study of women’s sexual behaviour. Both reports attested that many types of sexual practices were much more common than previously believed.

\textsuperscript{14} Yonay, “It Is Not Allowed to be Homosexual”.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Yuval Yonay, “The Law on Homosexual Orientation in Israel: Between History and Sociology”, \textit{Mishpat u Mimshal} 5 (1) (1998): 531–586; Yuval Yonay and Dori Spivak, “Between
Exposure to the idea of different sexual orientations and awareness of the gay social scene did not take place evenly across society. Jews who lived far from urban centres, immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East who arrived after independence, ultra-orthodox Jews, and Palestinians, generally had less contact with queer sub-cultures and were less exposed to the idea of sexual orientation as a permanent personality feature. Gradually, however, the notion of fixed binary sexual orientations became dominant in Israel.

This striking shift in conceptualizing same-sex relations in Israel during the 1950s and 1960s occurred during the lifetime of the men who were interviewed for this research. Those born relatively early (1920s and early 1930s) reached sexual maturity during a period when male same-sex was still widely considered a practice that all men, under particular circumstances, might undertake, rather than an indication of an aberrant sexual identity. Additionally, a distinction was made between the insertee (who was said to take the “passive” role) and the penetrator (who was said to take the “active” role), who often did not perceive himself, and was not perceived by others, as a deviant. Though this notion remains influential to this day, it stands in contrast to the more modern framework that regards all those who are attracted to men as “homosexuals” regardless of the sexual role that they perform.

**Army Service and Homosexuality**

The idea that some men are “homosexuals”, and that same-sex sex is not a matter of “bad behaviour” but rather the result of an innate tendency presented armed forces with new challenges. Military and naval authorities everywhere were aware of rampant male same-sex sex among soldiers and sailors but usually perceived it as a way that many men satisfied their sexual urges in all-male environments. When men were caught “in action,” disciplinary measures were taken, but there was no need to purge the army of a certain kind of people, as all men were assumed to be susceptible to the temptation of sexual gratification with other men, especially when they were performing the “manly role” in such a sexual contact. Having sexual contact with another man was regarded as improper and a sign of weak morality and not as evidence of abnormal...
personality. The expanding idea during mid-twentieth century that some men were by the very nature of their innate constitution attracted to men and consequently unfit for combat service required new policies toward those who committed same-sex acts and those suspected of belonging to this new category even when they abstained from sexual activity.

Allan Bérubé’s study of the long process of adaptation of the US armed forces during the Second World War and Paul Jackson’s study of the Canadian armed forces around the same time demonstrate the confusion involved in the drafting and application of these new policies. How does one distinguish between those men merely satisfying their sexual impulses and “real homosexuals”? How does the army treat soldiers and officers who served valiantly when they are exposed as homosexual? Can homosexuals be identified based on their physiological, psychological, or behavioural traits? Both American and Canadian authorities grappled with these and similar questions, and although both eventually issued orders to discharge homosexuals from military service, in practice these orders were met by numerous obstacles and most gay servicemen completed their service.

As explained above, when the IDF was created in 1948, the idea of sexual orientation was not yet familiar to most people in Israel, and there is no indication that the IDF was concerned with the issue of homosexual soldiers during its early years. It remains unclear precisely when this became a matter of concern for the IDF. It is true that many officers and soldiers who served in the Israeli army during its first years had served earlier in the British forces and were aware of male same-sex contacts among soldiers and officers. The United

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19 In the Prologue of his book, Randy Shilts brings several stories about deep long relationships between officers between the American Revolution to the First World War, as well as a few cases of male and female crossdressers. Although fascinating and instructive, we cannot discuss their significance here but should note that they took place under very different cultural understandings. See Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (New York, 1994).

20 The 1919 Newport scandal demonstrates that US Navy accepted as a matter of course the sexual behavior of sailors who were “served” by other men in the “woman role”. Only the latter were perceived as “sexual perverts” and put on trial. See Lawrence R. Murphy, *Perverts by Official Order: The Campaign against Homosexuals by the United States Navy* (New York 1988); George Chauncey, Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era”, *Journal of Social History* 19 (2) (1985): 189–211.

21 Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York, 1993); Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II*, 2nd edn. (Montreal and Kingston, 2010). See also Matthew Barrett, “Conduct Unbecoming an Officer and a Doctor: Medical Attitudes toward Homosexuality and the Court Martial of Dr. Percy Ryberg”, *Canadian Journal of History* 55 (102) (2020): 35–64.
Kingdom in general had a longer history than all other countries of legal prosecution of sodomy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including of soldiers during the First World War, 230 of whom were court-martialled during the war. Yet during the Second World War, “the demand for manpower ensured that gays and lesbians were not screened out of the service during mobilisation and, moreover, that nearly all were retained”. Although the Jewish volunteers from Mandatory Palestine knew about male-to-male sexual practices among their comrades, as well as among British officials in Palestine, they conceived such behaviour as something foreign to the Jewish community and therefore required no specific social action even if a few Jewish men fell victim from time to time to such a proclivity. This attitude, as well as the urgent need to establish a new army, train thousands of new conscripts, and defend the new country, may explain why the IDF was not preoccupied with producing a special policy concerning homosexual servicepersons. Perhaps in similar fashion to the abandonment of the issue by the British Military during the Second World War, the IDF simply did not have the leisure at the time to screen out conscripts in such a manner.

The earliest documentation of a policy towards homosexuals’ service is from 1983, and it is not clear whether there had been earlier written instructions concerning homosexuality. However, Israeli law scholar and queer theorist Aeyal Gross, who refers to this period as a “black hole”, has found several documents that shed light on the question of how homosexuals were handled by the IDF before 1983. The first document pertains to a rare army judicial case dating back to 1956, in which two soldiers were sentenced to one year in prison for consensual sexual contact with each other. There are no written details specifying the circumstances under which they had committed the act, but both men admitted to performing it twice. In the defendants’ appeal, a professional medical opinion concerning the two defendants and homosexuality in general was presented to court. The consulting psychiatrist stated in the opinion that homosexuality was a disease rather than a crime and distinguished

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22 Harry G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desires in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2003); Matt Cook, *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex between Men Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford and Westport, CT, 2007); A.D. Harvey, “Homosexuality and the British Army During the First World War”, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 79 (2001): 313–319.

23 Emma Vickers, “[The Good Fellow]: Negotiation, Remembrance, and Recollection – Homosexuality in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945”, in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2009), 134. An example of leniency towards British soldiers caught in male same-sex sex in Acre, Palestine in 1943 is given by Orna Alyagon Darr, *Plausible Crime Stories*, 45.

24 Ofri Ilany, “[An Oriental Vice”]; Yuval Yonay, “[It Is Not Allowed to be Homosexual”.

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between three different categories: “absolute homosexuality”, “hermaphrodite tendency” [bisexuality], and “normal people who under irregular conditions, such as prison, captivity [POWs], a ship at sea, and even in the context of an army unit, find satisfaction in this way, and when the irregular conditions change, they return to being normal in their sexuality”.25

This important document demonstrates the confusion that prevailed during this interregnum period between the traditional and modern discourses. The court was convinced enough by the medical view to significantly shorten the punishment of the two defendants (from imprisonment of one year for both soldiers to seventy days for the assumed “seducer” and to one day for the “seduced” soldier). Two main reasons for the leniency of the penalty were the judges’ belief that due to the “rare nature of the offense” within the IDF, deterrence was not required; and the judges’ concern with exacerbating the defendants’ deviance due to the gendered conditions in prison.26

The second document recovered by Gross is an internal instruction, issued by the Military Advocate General in 1977. It states that a soldier should not be prosecuted for committing sodomy unless the act involved a minor or a commander with a subordinate, or involved a use of force, or was conducted in public.27 This is a similar instruction to the civilian instruction issued by the State Attorney General in 1953,28 which had similarly restricted the terms for the prosecution of sodomy offences in Israel. The question arises as to why this instruction was issued twenty-four years after the corresponding civilian one. Were soldiers prosecuted for consensual sodomy until 1977? Or was this instruction merely a codification of a longstanding IDF practice that had followed the spirit of the civilian instruction? In any case, it should be emphasized that the 1977 instruction, like that of the Attorney General from 1953, referred to a practice, “sodomy”, and not to a class of people, “homosexuals”, who were assumed to practice it.

A third document relating to the question of homosexuality in the IDF is a booklet published in 1982. In that year, the Association for the Protection of Individuals’ Rights (“Agudah”), the first LGBT organization in Israel, established in 1975, embarked on a campaign to improve the legal status of homosexuals. A

25 Aeyal Gross, “Sexuality, Masculinity, Military, and Citizenship”, 143.
26 The verdict of the Military Appellate Court is available at http://www.lgbtlaw.tau.ac.il/sites/default/files/field/judgment/file/130–56.pdf, extracted 30 September 2020. See also Matan Mekhaber, “1956 – ‘a/56/130 Private A and Private B vs. The Military Advocate General”, https://www.idf.il/media/51434/1956-םפת-ב-2-ב-130–56-.pdf, 30 September 2020.
27 Gross, “Sexuality, Masculinity, Military, and Citizenship”, 142.
28 Yonay and Spivak, “Between Silence and Damnation”.

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short booklet was prepared\textsuperscript{29} containing basic information on homosexuality and statements by professionals opposing discrimination against homosexuals, which was distributed to all 120 members of the Knesset.\textsuperscript{30} The booklet concluded with letters written by the Commander of the Medical Corps, Brigadier General Dr Eran Dolev, and the Head of the Conscription Division, Colonel Moshe Yaari. The former letter categorically stated that “homosexuality was not a medical issue and therefore the Medical Corps does not deal with it”, meaning that homosexuals were not disqualified due to their sexuality. The second letter also asserted that homosexuals – “self-identified (\textit{mutzhar}; lit. “declared”) and those who are not” – were drafted into the army and assigned to various roles with no limitations. Nonetheless, a vague reservation was added: to prevent “injustice and abuse”, homosexuals were assigned to roles where they were not exposed to some stresses and injuries due to “the nature of things” related to their “condition”.\textsuperscript{31}

Yaari’s letter raises several questions: Did some draftees identify themselves as homosexuals? It is possible that those whose performance disclosed sexual or gender divergence from normative masculinity were apprehensive of harassment in regular units and sought the protection mentioned by Yaari. Furthermore, the popular discourse at the time did not distinguish between homosexuals and transgender women as men who sought sexual contacts with other men and men who identified as women were both seen as two manifestations of the same “pathology”. Transgender women, as well as visibly feminine gays, were everywhere exposed to ridicule and abuse at the time, and even more so in the hyper-masculine IDF. Coming out to the military authorities might have helped insure a safer placement. Another question stemming from Yaari’s letter concerns the matter of homosexuals who were not open about their sexuality. How could the army have a policy about them if they did not disclose their sexual orientation?

The earliest IDF document concerning the service of homosexuals found thus far is a regulation issued in 1983 by the IDF Manpower Division. It restricted the assignment of homosexuals and barred them from “sensitive positions” on the grounds of the major security risk that blackmail posed. Given the “black hole” concerning earlier policies toward gays in the IDF (if

\textsuperscript{29} HaAgudah Leshmirat Zekhuiot HaPrat (The Association for the Preservation of Individuals’ Rights), an untitled publication (unofficially recognized as “the blue notebook”) (Tel Aviv, 1983).

\textsuperscript{30} Yonay, “The Law on Homosexual Orientation in Israel”.

\textsuperscript{31} The letters refer to “homosexuality" and “homosexual”, and there is no reference to gender. While in principle they could refer to both men and women, it seems to us likely that the authors were thinking about gay men and not about lesbians.
such policies ever existed\(^{32}\), the 1983 regulation is open to debate. It may have been a liberal step in comparison to more restrictive, perhaps unwritten rules, that had limited homosexuals’ service even more than the aforementioned regulation. Conversely, the regulation may have damaged the gays’ position in the IDF by explicitly regulating their potential military stationing, which until then had not been policed – thus institutionalizing discriminatory practices and making discrimination against gays in the IDF obligatory and universal.\(^{33}\)

Various sources indicate that gays served in the IDF throughout the years in diverse positions. Personal stories of Israeli gays appeared regularly in Israeli newspapers and magazines beginning in the mid-1990s, coming from men who had served in the army in the 1970s and later. The testimonies of gay activists and public figures who participated in several documentary projects support this claim.\(^{34}\) Additional accounts of gay men’s military service in later times can be found in Danny Kaplan’s study on gay men who served in the IDF during the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{35}\)

Most of the twenty-one participants in Kaplan’s study had not yet fully developed a gay identity at the time of their interviews, and their army service enabled them to compare themselves to peers and recognize their differences. Significantly, their reports indicate no special difficulties adapting to the military environment. By the end of their service, usually around the age of twenty-one to twenty-two, many of Kaplan’s interviewees had already solidified a gay identity and felt secure enough to disclose it to their close friends within army units and elsewhere. As we will see below, personal testimonies from our own research confirm that gay men served in various positions in the IDF during the 1950s and 1960s as well, and their accounts bear similarities to those collected by Kaplan.

Notably, however, Kaplan’s interviewees differ from ours in one crucial way. While the participants in Kaplan’s research grew up in a society governed by the assumption that people belonged to one sexual category (gay, straight, or bisexual), most of our interviewees had not been familiar with that type of sexual categorization during the time of their military service. Only our youngest interviewees served in the military at a time when sexual orientation was a familiar notion to the wider (Jewish) population. As we shall see, due to their

\(^{32}\) Gross, “Sexuality, Masculinity, Military, and Citizenship”.

\(^{33}\) Aaron Belkin and Melissa Levitt, “Homosexuality and the Israel Defense Forces”; Reuven Gal, “Gays in the Military”; Yagil Levy, “A Liberal Army in a Conservative Society”.

\(^{34}\) E.g., Amir Sumakai Fink and Jacob Press, Independence Park: The Lives of Gay Men in Israel (Stanford, CA, 1999).

\(^{35}\) Danny Kaplan, Brothers and Others in Arms.
service during a period of paradigm change, our interviewees present a wide range of interpretations of their own sexuality and varying strategies for negotiating the perils of same-sex behaviour at the time.

**The Research Project**

The interviews used for this article were conducted by the second author since 2001 in an effort to preserve the early recollections of a generation of gay men before they pass away. An effort was made to cover a wide range of topics, including early feelings of “being different,” knowledge about homosexuality, coming out to family and friends, sexual and romantic experiences, awareness of other gays, social networks and queer spaces, a sense of discrimination and danger, and familiarity with gay motifs in arts and literature. Because no special focus was placed on military service, not all interviews included clear details regarding it – although recollections of military service did pervade most of the interviews. Notwithstanding the relative lack of uniformity in the interviews, the information obtained from them about the experiences of gays who served in the IDF in the 1950s and 1960s is invaluable. Hardly any alternative sources exist from which to learn about gays’ experiences in the IDF during this period, described above as the “black hole”.

Thirty-two men were interviewed in this ongoing research, all born between 1924 and 1948. Sixteen interviewees were born in Mandatory Palestine/Israel, and sixteen were born abroad, among whom four immigrated to Israel as infants, six arrived between the ages of nine and eleven, and six more were between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. All men are of Jewish heritage, mostly Ashkenazi but a few were Sephardic Jews. Four of the thirty-two men in this study were married for long periods of time, and twenty-eight men remained single or formed gay relationships of one kind or another. Table 1 summarizes the interviewees’ relevant biographical details.

It is worth mentioning an important caveat: Our sample is far from representative of all gay men who served in the IDF during the studied period. There are several reasons for this limitation. First, it is not clear who should be regarded as a homosexual: Any man who desires other men, or only those men for whom such a desire is exclusive? Should we include those who are attracted to men but do not actually conduct same-sex sex? What about those who have had regular sexual contacts with men but do not consider themselves to be gays? Second, many of the men who have had sex and intimate relations with other men during the studied period have married women and have conducted their same-sex experiences and emotions in hiding, making these experiences
| No. | Alias | Born  | Country of Birth (Migration to Israel) | Years of Service | Unit/Role          | Gay Awareness at age 18 | Sexually Active Prior to IDF | Sexual Activity with Men in Service | Family status       |
|-----|-------|-------|----------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1   | Otto  | 1924  | Germany (1940)                         | Discharged       | Unknown            | No                      | Unknown                   | Gay partnership                  | Single              |
| 2   | Reuven| 1924  | Germany (1933)                         | 1949             | Unknown            | Yes                     | Gay identity              | Gay partnership                  | Married to a woman |
| 3   | Meir  | 1926  | Czechoslovakia (1939)                  | 1947–1951        | Medic              | Unknown                 | Unknown                   | Occasional, Inside             | Single              |
| 4   | Avi   | 1930  | Hungary (1949)                         | 1950–1953        | Intelligence       | Yes                     | Gay identity              | Gay friendship                  | Gay partnership      |
| 5   | Yoav  | 1930  | Mandatory Palestine                    | 1948–1950        | Unknown            | No                      | None                      | Gay partnership                  | Gay partnership      |
| 6   | Menachem | 1931 | Lithuania (1932)                      | 1949–1951        | Unknown            | No                      | None                      | None                             | Single              |
| 7   | Boaz  | 1931  | Germany (1932)                         | 1949–1953        | Infantry           | Once                    | None                      | None                             | Unknown             |
| 8   | Golan | 1932  | Germany (1935)                         | Discharged       | Unknown            | No                      | Unknown                   | Gay partnership                  | Gay partnership      |
| 9   | Ronen | 1932  | Mandatory Palestine                   | 1950–1952        | Radio Operator     | Yes                     | Gay Identity              | Gay partnership                  | Gay partnership      |
| 10  | Matan | 1934  | Mandatory Palestine                   | 1950–1952        | Air Force HQ       | No                      | Awareness                 | Frequent, inside              | Gay partnership      |
| 11  | Avner | 1934  | Germany (1934)                         | 1951–1952        | Infantry and Military Band | No                      | None                      | None                             | Gay partnership      |
|   | Name   | Year of Birth | Country of Birth (Year of Independence) | Service Years | Corps/Military Role | Gay Identity | Same-sex Relationships | Relationship Status |
|---|--------|--------------|----------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 12| Michael| 1935         | Turkey (1948)                          | 1952–1954    | Medic             | Yes          | Yes                    | Frequent, inside  |
| 13| Meshulam| 1937        | Iraq (1951)                            | 1955–1956    | Infantry          | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only     |
| 14| Arik   | 1938         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1956–1958    | Golani (Infantry) | Yes          | Yes                    | Frequent, inside  |
| 15| Shimon | 1938         | France (1949)                          | 1958–1961    | Adjudant Corps    | No           | No                     | None              |
| 16| Eviatar| 1938         | Bulgaria (1948)                        | 1957–1960    | Unknown           | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only     |
| 17| Gad    | 1940         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1958–1960    | Technician (Air Force) | No   | No                     | Long-term relationship, inside |
| 18| Aner   | 1940         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1957–1967    | Intelligence     | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only     |
| 19| Dov    | 1941         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1959–1961    | Military Journalist | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only, married to a woman |
| 20| David  | 1941         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1959–1961    | Armored Corps     | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only     |
| 21| Ronel  | 1941         | India (1952)                           | 1959–1961    | Intelligence     | No           | No                     | Outside only     |
| 22| Kobi   | 1943         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1963–1966    | Trainer for Squad Commanders | Yes | No                     | Outside only, occasionally on reserve duty |
| 23| Amiel  | 1946         | Mandatory Palestine (Palestine)        | 1964–1966    | Logistical Corps | Yes          | Yes                    | Outside only     |
| 24| Yair   | 1946         | Morocco (1963)                         | 1965–1967    | Unknown           | Yes          | Yes                    | Gay partnership  |
| No. | Alias | Born | Country of Birth (Migration to Israel) | Years of Service | Unit/Role | Gay Awareness at age 18 | Sexually Active Prior to IDF | Sexual Activity with Men in Service | Family status |
|-----|-------|------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| 25  | Mike  | 1947 | Mandatory Palestine                    | 1965–1968       | Optics Technician | Gay Identity           | Yes                         | Outside only                     | Single         |
| 26  | Shmuel| 1947 | Mandatory Palestine                    | 1965–1967       | Youth Instructor  | Vague awareness        | Yes                         | Occasional, inside               | Unknown        |
| 27  | Aviad | 1947 | Mandatory Palestine                    | 1970–1977?      | Naval Officer     | Gay identity           | No                          | Outside only                     | Gay partnership |
| 28  | Yehuda| 1947 | Mandatory Palestine                    | 1965            | Discharged after brief service | Gay identity | Unknown                     | Unknown                          | Single         |
| 29  | Tzuriel| 1948 | Israel                                 | 1965–1968       | Infantry          | Awareness              | Unknown                     | None                             | Unknown        |
| 30  | Shlomi| 1948 | Israel                                 | 1967–1969       | Infantry          | Gay identity           | Yes                         | Occasional, inside               | Gay partnership |
| 31  | Ariel | 1948 | France (1958)                          | 1967–1975       | Navy               | None/vague awareness | No                          | Outside only                     | Single         |
| 32  | Daniel| 1948 | England (1958)                         | 1966–1968       | Unknown            | Awareness              | Unknown                     | Outside only                     | Married to a woman; gay partnership |
almost impossible to document. Third, gays who live in remote areas are also underrepresented, as well as those who migrated out of Israel. Finally, all of our interviewees portrayed themselves as exhibiting normative masculine behaviour, and therefore our study does not take into account men who displayed less conventional gender behaviour. Thus, we suggest that our results be approached with due caution and taken as a window onto the mindsets, articulations, and activities surrounding sexuality, gender, and military service in a period of shifting conceptions of sexuality in Israel.

Findings

Motivation to Serve and Handling of Homosexual Servicemen

Table 1 shows the interviewees' gay awareness prior to conscription and their sexual experiences during their service. Among the thirty-two men, two did not serve at all in the IDF. One of them expressed disappointment in the army for not being interested in his abilities. The second was disqualified due to low weight and severe vision problems. Out of the thirty interviewees who were drafted, all but one successfully fulfilled their assigned period of service. Of those thirty men, we know in which units they served in twenty-three cases, of which fourteen were field-units and nine were non-combat positions (intelligence, technical, logistics, communication). The small sample size does not allow for any correlation between sexuality and assigned army position, but it appears clear that being gay at the time did not prevent people from serving in diverse army positions, including combat and intelligence positions.

Because our interviews were not exclusively about military experiences, we did not focus on motivations to serve. Military service came up during the interviews as speakers freely narrated their life stories. Nevertheless, military service was a recurring chapter in those stories due to its importance in most Jewish men's lives in Israel during that period. One story, that of David, showcases the importance of army service for Jewish men at the time and its possible clash with deviant sexuality.

David, born in 1941, experienced his first sexual encounters with men at around age fifteen in the back rows of cinemas, on rooftops, and in the hidden corners in and around Tel Aviv of the late 1950s. During those years and before his enlistment, he had heard nothing about homosexuality. Initially, he stated that he had not been aware of the concept of “homosexuality”, but later in the interview, when asked about telling his parents of his sexuality, he recalled something long forgotten:
At the age of seventeen and a half I told my parents. [...] It happened when I [...] was called to the Recruitment Office, and I already knew the word [homosexuality]. [...] somehow, I knew that that word referred to me, and I knew that the army didn't enlist homosexuals. [...] My fear was that I would get there, and they would find out through tests or exams [...] and would kick me out.

Despite his fears, David was enlisted without incident and served in the Armoured Corps. This story reveals a pattern: Gay men – at least those interviewed in this study – were just as keen as other men to serve in the army and did serve. None was disqualified due to his sexual tendencies, nor did they use these tendencies to shirk their military duty.

**IDF’s Policy Toward Homosexuals**

Was David’s fear of being categorically exempted due to his homosexuality justified? His anxiety seems exceptional, and a systematic study of all Hebrew newspapers of the time\(^{36}\) failed to reveal even a single reference to such a policy. No other interviewee mentioned a similar worry. Nor, the interviews seem to demonstrate, did homosexual activity serve as grounds, as a matter of policy, for discharge from the army. During his vacations, David would continue to meet an Italian diplomat with whom he had had a long affair prior to his conscription. The army found out about it, and David was summoned for an inquiry:

> When the interrogation started, I didn’t understand what they wanted from me [...] he asked me [...] whether my sexual intercourse was normal? and I answered ‘yes’. I mean, I didn’t try to hide it, I just didn’t think it was abnormal. [...] I realized that they had done a comprehensive study on me, that they knew more about me than I knew about myself. [...] they had followed me for every single day of my life, and if I got some detail wrong [they corrected me].

Yet David was not discharged from the army, nor was he put on trial. “I stayed in the army, and we reached an agreement that I would stop meeting [the diplomat]”, but no other sanctions were applied. Furthermore, David was later transferred to a classified unit of Centurion tanks, the outcome of an armament

\(^{36}\) Yonay, “It Is Not Allowed to be Homosexual”. 
deal with the United Kingdom that had been top-secret at the time. Another interviewee told us that:

One day I was summoned by the Field Security unit. Someone had snitched on me. I went there and was interrogated for six hours. [...] I was at a [gay] party at the house of the French cultural attaché, [...] and two weeks later I was called and questioned about being there, with whom I was, what I was doing there, and whether I was gay. I denied. [...] I was sure they would throw me [out]. Luckily for me, they didn't (Amiel, serving 1964–66).

Notably, both stories about official investigation by the army involved foreign diplomats. One might speculate that the army involved itself in cases of same-sex sex only when it involved international or exceptional social ties. Yet even in these two cases, no measures to discharge or move the gays to “suitable positions” were taken.

These recollections point to an absence of a policy to sack homosexuals from the army at the time – but could homosexuality still have led to voluntary or forced discharge in some cases? Was it a factor in the placement process? We have scarce data about these issues, but some of our interviewees believed that homosexuals could be exempted from service upon request, or would be banned from pursuing a military career. We turn now to these testimonies.

Two interviewees claimed to have known that homosexuals could receive military exemptions on the basis of their sexuality. Boaz (b. 1931), who served in the early 1950s, said that at the time, “people who wanted to be exempted from military service went to a psychiatrist and declared that they were homosexual”. Although this testimony is based on hearsay rather than on personal experience, Boaz’s reference to psychiatrists provides us with a clue to what stands behind the belief that homosexuals got military exemptions. Special medical committees within the army could determine, and to this day continue to determine, the “inaptness” of a potential conscript. Indeed, many Israelis have used these medical determinations to avoid service for various reasons, ranging from psychological difficulties to conscientious objection. A psychiatrist’s statement attesting that one was a homosexual would have been a simple method to convince the medical committee to grant an exemption at the time, especially if accompanied by evidence of feminine gender performativity.

The second testimony regarding the exemption of homosexuals from service comes from Avi, who was born in 1930 and served between 1950–1953 in a classified unit:
Avi: When I was in the army, many men got exempted because of – they declared.

 [...] Q: Were they gays?
 Avi: They were gays and they declared so, and they were exempted.
 Q: Automatically?
 Avi: Yes, almost automatically. It has never crossed my mind to get exempted for this reason [homosexuality] [...] It did not seem – It was not [well?] accepted.
 Q: Had your commanders known [about your homosexuality]?
 Avi: [Had they known] I assumed I would have been immediately discharged from Army Intelligence.

This account corroborates that of Boaz. It also raises questions. For example, what exactly did Avi mean when he said: “It has never crossed my mind that I could have declared [being homosexual]”. Did it not “cross his mind” because of his view of service as a national duty, or was it due to the social costs of dodging military service? Or perhaps he was apprehensive of making his homosexuality known to other people and institutions? In any case, the statement strengthens the notion that men at the time – straight or otherwise – did not view discharge in general, and discharge on sexual grounds in particular, as a viable option. It also suggests that if a policy of discharging homosexuals had existed at the time, it was not applied in a systematic way.

Only one story explicitly referenced the fear of some sort of policy limiting homosexuals’ service. Ariel (b. 1948) attended the naval boarding school in Acre from the age of fifteen and later joined the Naval Academy, serving as an officer until age twenty-seven. As a teenager, Ariel defined himself as gay and was terrified of being detected by the navy:

I wasn't very [sexually] active during my service, mainly because of my fears. [...] I was in the Naval Officers training, and I couldn't allow [my homosexuality] to be exposed, because at that period, if it became known about you, you would be discharged from the army. [Q: Did you know someone who was caught?] There were stories going around; [...] it was well known. [...] Whoever had a [homo]sexual orientation or something like that, he wouldn't last, they wouldn't recruit him, and if they would, he wouldn't be accepted to the Naval Academy and officers training. [...] Also in the entrance exams for the Navy Academy and during the security clearing, this item came up: “Did you have sex with men?” “Are you attracted to men?”
Ariel’s recollection offers convincing evidence that the navy was concerned about homosexuality. Aside from the rumours that he recalled, the questions encountered at each step of his training are still vivid in his memory fifty years later. Even if nobody was discharged from naval training due to homosexuality, such questions conveyed the message that “homosexuals are not welcome”. It might have deterred men with strong same-sex desires from pursuing naval careers or, as in the case of Ariel, kept these men deep in hiding.

**Sexual Harassment.** Because most men kept their deviant sexual desires a secret, they were not susceptible to harassment unless their sexuality accidently became known to commanders or peers. Those who displayed non-normative gender behavior were probably much more vulnerable, but all of our interviewees portrayed themselves as having exhibited normative masculine behavior and took care not to disclose their same-sex desires.

Let us recall the case of David, whose relationship with a foreign diplomat placed him on the army’s radar. Nonetheless, he never felt mistreated as a result of this surveillance, including when his homosexual tendencies were documented in his file. Only much later, after he was transferred to another base, did he encounter harassment:

> There was this disgusting sergeant major who made sure I realized that he knew about me. […]. He was abusive towards me, […] grounding me for weekends; […] so I decided that it was enough. […] I went to a psychiatrist and was discharged from the army. […] Only three months before the scheduled discharge.

This is the sole testimony of harassment among all of our interviewees. It is worth mentioning, however, that the absence of harassment narratives from our interviewees’ recollections might be explained by the “manly” appearance most of them exhibited throughout their service, rendering their otherness invisible to scrutinizing gazes. This reservation notwithstanding, our findings suggest that many gay men who served in the army at the time had an honourable service, developed a gay identity, formed significant relationships with other men, and had enjoyable sexual contacts during their service. This relatively benign situation seems to have changed during the 1960s, when our youngest interviewees served. We turn to their stories now.

**Fear of Being Exposed.** By the mid-1960s, the discourse on same-sex sex in Israel had changed. Interviewees who reached the army at this period tended to have already developed a gay identity when homophobia was becoming part of the hegemonic ideology. In our interviewees’ narratives, this shift was manifested in a growing concern about exposure. Mike, who joined the army in 1965, was preoccupied with his masculinity and “acted like a real man”. Due to
his beauty, he was popular among women soldiers, and once in a while would date one of them, “faking an interest in women”. “But when it came to sex”, he continued, “I got scared”. Mike was concerned that his female peers would understand that his sexual interests lay elsewhere if he did not initiate sexual contact with any of them. He therefore presented himself as “a gentleman”, who does not “take advantage” of women. Amiel, who enlisted in the army a year before Mike (1964), told a similar tale. He overheard a female soldier gossipping about the possibility that he was gay – a scenario inconceivable just a few years earlier when most people were unaware of homosexuals. In an effort to “shut her up”, Amiel approached her in a sexual way but, at some point, became “disgusted” and ran out. The experience, he said, was mutually embarrassing and swept under the rug. These testimonies indicate the vast energies gays spent in behaving according to heteronormative scripts.

More anguish emerged in the intertwined stories of two navy officers whose service continued into the 1970s. Ariel, mentioned above, served in the navy from 1967 to 1975; and Aviad (b. 1947), an engineer, joined the navy after his academic studies in 1970. Ariel’s fear of being exposed kept him away from cruising parks for most of his service, but once in a while he could not overcome the craving to meet men for sex. On one such a visit to Gan Binyamin in Haifa, he met Aviad, whom he recognized from his own naval base. Terrified, the two ran away from each other and refrained from discussing it during their service. Years later, they met in Tel Aviv and became friends.37 Both told us about their encounter in the park:

Ariel: I remember running into him and becoming extremely frightened (lakhatz atomi). I was already an instructor at the Naval Academy, and he taught a course there.

Q: Did you feel that following this encounter, you could share with him or talk with him about – ?

Ariel: Are you out of your mind? By no means!

Q: But you met in the park, and you must have realized that he was looking for the same thing that you were looking for. Didn’t it create a kind of – ?

Ariel: I was very, very reclusive; I did not want to tell anybody, hardly to myself. [...] back then I thought it was a deviance; I really thought it was a deviance.

Q: Didn’t you look for connections with other gays?

37 It was Aviad who connected us to Ariel.
Ariel: No, no, I did not have time for it, and I was terrified. [...] You got time off once in three months. So sometimes I went to the park and did this and that and left; not much, not developing relationships.

Aviad had a similar response: “We met in Gan Binyamin once, and I was awfully frightened. I was closeted then; I was afraid of my own shadow.” When we pointed out to him – as we did with Ariel – that they had been in the park for the same reason, he replied: “Yes, it’s a good argument (laughing) but in situations of mental pressure, you don’t think rationally.” Aviad was terrified that the IDF would discover his sexual tendencies and therefore attempted to “fix his homosexuality”, but “once in a long while”, he told us, “I couldn’t contain myself and went to one of the cruising parks”.

The deep anxiety felt by Mike, Amiel, Ariel, and Aviad – all born between 1946 and 1948 – demonstrates that by the mid-1960s, homosexuality had become stigmatized in Israeli society and those attracted to their own sex internalized the appalling stigma of themselves as well. Older interviewees had exercised care not to be caught and exposed, but none of them expressed anything like the anxiety described by the younger interviewees.

**Sexual and Romantic Relationships during Military Service**

In this section, we will examine same-sex sexual behaviour and romantic relationships during our interviewees’ military service. The stories display a wide range of experiences corresponding to the diversity of the interviewees’ backgrounds and conditions of service. In order to capture the multiplicity of behaviors and experiences, we present several stories that particularly reflect this diversity.

**Rampant sex.** The most scandalous story about same-sex sex within the army was told to us by Arik (b. 1938) who, according to his own testimony, was attracted to men and had numerous sexual experiences with his male peers from an early age. The following is taken from the interview brief:

“Arik claims to have been completely open about his sexuality during his army service and very sexually active in his unit. According to his stories, he had sex with his entire platoon, give or take. He stated that when they would go out on a mission and would pair up to sleep in pup tents, he would usually have sex with his tent partner, and while others had a fixed tent partner, he would

38 Arik was among the very few interviewees who refused to be recorded; therefore, the following description is based on extensive notes taken by the interviewer.
always switch his partners. Others would ask him: ‘Well, Arik, who will you be sleeping with today?’ Arik claims that everybody knew about him and that it was really okay with everybody. [...] He narrates that this pattern of sexual activity with his comrades went on for a long period even during the 1956 War. During that war, there was a period of ambush missions, and the weather was very cold. They would go in groups of four and would lay down on the ground, each facing a different direction. All of the soldiers were happy to go on an ambush with him, he says, and they joked that ‘when you are with Arik, you don’t have to worry about the cold, for Arik will keep you warm’.”

Arik nostalgically reminisced about his sexual experiences in the army. He rationalized the sexual promiscuity described in his narrative by saying that the army was like a prison, an all-male environment that made sex among men frequent and implicitly acceptable. The commanding officers, he claimed, knew about his sexual activities and he even speculated that they were also sexually interested in him, but abstained in order to differentiate themselves from rank-and-file soldiers.

We were astonished by Arik’s testimony, and suspected that it was fabrication or fantasy. Other interviewees who served in combat units at the same period were also sceptical. Two other interviewees, however, had heard rumours about frequent same-sex sex within their units or bases. Shimon (b. 1938), who was aware of his own attraction to men upon being drafted, overheard that the cooks in his base “fucked around with each other”. He was curious about it but did not think about them as prospects for his own desire. Instead, he framed the situation as “men stuck together, as in jail, who have no other [sexual] option”. Another interviewee also heard about male soldiers who had had sex but he “didn’t think of it as being gay, but as people who are locked up in prison and have sex; you do it out of lack of other options”.

Interestingly, the notion of jail as a space where heterosexual men regularly have sex with other men appeared in all three testimonies on widespread sexual activity among men within the army. This idea fits the aforementioned pre-modern discourse about sexuality. Before the perception of “sexual orientation” as a fundamental feature of all people, many men all over the world felt that they could satisfy their sexual needs with other men without jeopardizing their masculine respectability and status.39 Sofer,40 who interviewed Arab and

39 E.g., Ben-Naeh, “Moshko the Jew and His Gay Friends”; Chauncey, “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion?”; Manuel Fernandez-Alemany and Stephen O. Murray, _Heterogender Homosexuality in Honduras_ (San Jose, CA, 2002); Roger N. Lancaster, _Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua_ (Berkeley, CA, 1994).

40 Sofer, “Testimonies from the Holy Land”.
Mizrahi Jewish men in cruising areas in Israel during the early 1970s, reported that many of his interviewees were heterosexual men who frequented cruising areas in search of “passive” men especially when their wives were not sexually available to them. By maintaining their sexual role as “active” men, they were able to preserve their masculine respectability for themselves and in front of others, because sexual roles at the time held more societal meaning than the gender identity of one’s partner.

The “gay ring”. Another intriguing account of widespread male sex in the IDF during the 1950s, though of a very different nature, was given by Matan (b. 1934), who served in the Air Force Headquarters in Tel Aviv. During his service, he discovered the cruising parks of Tel Aviv – all within walking distance of the HQ – and became a regular visitor there. During one such visit, he met an HQ officer, and learned through him about a clandestine ring of gay officers in the Air Force:

There were some senior gays there [...] British army veterans. [...] Very high ranks, lieutenant colonels [sa’alim = seganey aluf], maybe a bit lower than that. I had met one [in the park] who turned out to be quite a high-ranking officer [...] Then they passed us, the young soldiers, around from one officer to another. It is not that we were like whores, but gossip travelled among those [ex-]British officers.

Through gossip, the officers marked the younger soldiers who were “in the business” of same-sex sex. According to Matan, there were about four high-ranking officers who took part in this circle, all married but one. He believes that they had been interested in lasting relationships with him, but he had declined their advances. One unmarried officer, however, became his “patron”. At this point in the interview, Matan’s partner intervened and steered the conversation to other topics, and we had no chance to ask Matan what he meant by “patron”. Matan’s story, like Arik’s, was a singleton, but we were less suspicious of it, perhaps because the clandestine nature of the relationships reported by him is similar to what we know from later decades.

Entering the army with an already-formed gay identity. Among the thirty interviewees who served in the army, eleven reported developing what one may call a “gay identity” prior to their conscription. Those drafted during the 1950s were not aware of the concept of “homosexuality” and its meaning in professional literature, but they understood that their sexual drives were different from what was considered “normal” and knew that there were other men “like them”. Those recruited during the 1960s, were usually aware of the label “homosexual” and understood that the label referred to people like them.
All of these men had pursued sexual encounters during their high school years, either regularly, knowing where and how to cruise for sexual partners, or occasionally, when someone else sensed their desire for men. Joining the army was therefore not crucial for the development of their gay identities. On the contrary, they viewed the all-male environment of the armed services as an unsuitable space for romantic and sexual liaisons. They knew where to find partners in cruising spaces without the risk of approaching “wrong” candidates, thus exposing their homosexuality. Hence, they were quite circumspect in seeking sexual adventures inside military bases. In some cases, they preferred not to have sexual relationships in the army at all. In other cases, they allowed themselves to exploit opportunities when those were presented by more daring soldiers. Let us turn to some examples.

Tzuriel (b. 1948), who had had a sense during his adolescence that “something was wrong with him” sexually, served in an infantry unit between 1965 and 1968. He told us that he had no sexual encounters whatsoever inside the army. “There was nothing”, he emphatically said, not even “conversations about sex with my pals”. Unlike Tzuriel, Daniel (b. 1948) had no sexual experience until his service although he was aware of being attracted to men since he was twelve years old. As one of our youngest interviewees, he grew up in a period in which homosexuality was already well known and harshly stigmatized, and he was therefore preoccupied by efforts to conceal his sexuality. He told us that “he did not want to get married” but thought that he had to because “otherwise I would be assumed to be gay”. For this reason, he did not initiate any sexual activity until discovering the brisk sexual scene in the public restrooms of the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station on his way to his base and back home. Since that discovery, he frequented the spot regularly, but within his military unit, he did not dare initiating any kind of sexual activity and knew nothing about such activities among his friends.

Gay maturation in the army. While some recruits had a clear idea of their different sexuality when they joined the army, others lacked such self-understanding and reached it during their service. In the next three cases presented, interviewees expressed an understanding of themselves as homosexuals based on experiences within military establishments. Two of these cases include men who had drafted with some male same-sex sex already on their resume, while the third had none.

Michael was born in 1935 in Turkey and immigrated to Israel in 1948. He was sent to be educated on a kibbutz with other teen-age immigrants, and his first sexual experience was with a peer, a boy from Morocco. His second experience was with a soldier from the Nahal brigade (a unit combining military
tasks and agricultural work in kibbutzim) who was stationed in his kibbutz: “We were sixteen, and they were nineteen, twenty, and I had something with them as well. For example, I worked with one of them in picking up corn, and he offered to have a stroll with me after dinner, and we walked to the fishponds, and whatever happened, happened.” It is unclear whether this was a romantic encounter or was the soldier “taking advantage” of Michael, but this experience, and perhaps several other encounters with soldiers from the Nahal, played a key role in shaping Michael’s sexual development. When asked about sexual experiences during his military service as a medic (1952–54), he answered: “yes, not many, but I did have some. There was also someone for a full year. When we were training outside of the base [be’sidra], he would sleep with me in the clinic bus; we had full (i.e., anal) sex; what a disgrace (laughing)”. Michael also had a sexual relationship with an Iraqi cook who brought him food from the officers’ kitchen. During his service, Michael realized that his sexuality was unconventional and was careful not to disclose it, going as far as actively distancing himself from an effeminate male soldier who was mocked by his comrades.

Shmuel (b. 1947), who served as a youth instructor in the army and had been attracted to men since he was twelve, had had recurring sexual experiences with two children of his age in his neighbourhood. He also had sexual experiences with two adult men before his army service in the public restrooms at the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station and in a movie theatre. He continued to visit one of the men regularly, pretending he was his English tutor. Yet, Shmuel did not think of himself as being homosexual, a term he had known as a slur before his service. Responding to seduction attempts in the army was part of the development of his gay identity:

There was a Moroccan cook with whom I was for two years. He started with me. […] One day I was on kitchen duty [toran mitbakh], and a Yemenite kashrut supervisor made a pass at me. I told both him and the cook, “Are you crazy?” I was afraid people would talk about me; I didn’t look gay. With the kashrut supervisor I also agreed eventually. It was during my kitchen duty. I washed the dishes and he started playing down there. I told him, ‘I warn you, I will f – you”. He said, “please do”. He liked to receive [be penetrated]. […] Twice, I was with him in his room [in the base]. I saw him after the service in the Hakhashmal [cruising] Park, and he invited me to his apartment. We stayed in contact for some time. He has never married. […] With the Moroccan cook, I was [together] two years continuously.
Later in the interview, Shmuel mentioned an incident in which he “badly desired someone [from his base] and told him about an erotic dream about him. He smiled and a small [khafif] thing [probably referring to a sexual act without penetration] came out of it”. In this case, Shmuel seduced a presumably “straight” soldier who responded positively to his fancy. Later in the interview, Shmuel described how another quite feminine-like soldier in the base who people “knew about” introduced him to cruising parks in Tel Aviv. “There was something between us”, he said, adding nothing more. Taken together, Shmuel’s stories show how during the army he was socialized as a gay man, both in the art of seduction and in acquaintance with other gay men and prominent cruising scenes.

While Shmuel and Michael had experienced male same-sex sex before joining the army, Gad (b. 1940; technician in the Air Force, 1958–1961) lacked such experience. Moreover, he could not recall any episode of being attracted to someone specific or being seduced by somebody. Unlike his male friends, he was not attracted to women and was terribly embarrassed when his boot camp buddies discussed sex. Later, while in service performing a night exercise in his airbase, his life changed dramatically:

Gad: We slept next to the airplanes. So I laid down next to a guy my age who was a close friend; he always wanted my company. We began to fumble and such. Then whatever happened, happened. We became a couple there and then. [...] Then we were discharged, and each went his own way. He got married and has two kids. [...] I met him accidently several times. Q: May we say that you were in love with him or that he was in love with you?
Gad: What is love? I was attached (kashur) to him. [...] On vacations, he visited me; I visited him; I came to know his parents. [...] Q: Is it possible to say that he was gay?
Gad: He was gay. Today it is called bisexual.
Q: Did you talk about it? Did you talk about your relationship?
Gad: We didn’t talk, we didn’t think, and we didn’t plan. We let it go; it happened; it passed; Each of us had fun and that was it.

Gad’s romance took place within an airbase and was unnoticed – as far as he knows – by superiors and peers. He and his partner pretended to be good friends, visiting each other’s homes and dating women to avoid suspicion. If someone in their surroundings suspected, they did not blow the whistle. Perhaps they gossiped, but our methodology could not reveal what non-gay soldiers knew, sensed, or speculated. Gad and his lover did not know about
other people who were like them and did not seek out a “community” of such people. According to Gad, they did not discuss “their situation” even between themselves, and his lover has probably led a regular married lifestyle since their army service. Gad himself, however, perceived himself as gay from that point on, thus marking this experience during his service as transformative to his sense of self going forward.

Discussion

What can we learn from the narratives of the gay men who served in the IDF between 1948 and the mid-1970s? First, we can conclude that gay men have served in the IDF since its formation. All of our interviewees served in the army, except for the two who were medically exempted. Only three respondents mentioned the possibility of exemption by “declaring homosexuality”, and none personally considered such a route except for one man who towards the very end of his service visited a military psychiatrist to get an early discharge, following harassment by a non-commissioned officer who had found out about his homosexuality. This interviewee, along with one other, were the only ones who were explicitly interrogated about their sexuality, and both cases included contact with a foreign diplomat, indicating that the IDF in the 1950s and 1960s was not concerned with homosexuality per se but with its potential security risks. Also in both cases, the army had solid information about the homosexuality of the two men and took no steps to prevent their draft or discharge them.

The fact that homosexuality was not considered an obstacle to military service in the 1950s and 1960s is not surprising. The term “homosexuality” was unfamiliar to most people and was assumed to be a rare pathological condition rather than a designation for a group of people. It is possible that conspicuously effeminate men were exempted from service, deemed incompetent, so an explicit rule regarding “homosexuality” was not needed. Though same-sex attraction and sodomy were considered improper or illegal – while not severely stigmatized as they would be later – the army seems not to have been concerned by the fact that some soldiers practiced homosexuality. This is probably also the reason that only one out of our thirty-two interviewees reported homophobic-based abuse of any sort.

This general lack of awareness of homosexuality in Israeli society made it unlikely that many of our interviewees would have developed a gay identity prior to enlistment. A few solidified their sexuality only after their service, while many others developed a type of gay awareness during their military
years. Some of them had had same-sex experiences prior to service, but those had not necessarily crystalized into identity formation at the time. In a few cases, they had had no same-sex experiences, and developed an understanding of their sexuality during their service. Yet, a significant number of interviewees had developed a gay identity before enlistment. One had developed it prior to immigration to Israel, and the rest were introduced to underground gay circles by other gay men in their pre-military years.

During the 1960s, the Israeli public became preoccupied with homosexuals’ (and to a lesser extent, lesbians’) quiet prevalence in society. This public interest was marked by a deep repugnance toward homosexuals, an attitude shared by our youngest interviewees before they understood that they belonged to that abhorred group. Their narratives were therefore riddled with memories of anxiety about being identified as homosexuals. The two navy officers, born after 1940, who met by chance in a cruising park in Haifa, is a case in point. Older interviewees, while acknowledging a need to be discreet, did not express such fears. The questions about same-sex experiences that Ariel was asked, already in the naval boarding school, and later in the exams for the Naval Academy might also indicate a greater concern within the Navy about homosexuality. As exemplified in the expert testimony of the psychiatrist in the 1956 case, this was due to the stereotype of seamen being prone to same-sex sex.41 As we interviewed only two gays who served in the Navy, and they were also the youngest among our interviewees, we cannot say conclusively that the Israeli Navy differed from other IDF corps in its policies regarding homosexuality.

The fear of legal and social sanctions deterred many of our interviewees from having sex with other men on military bases. Yet, abstinence during the course of service did not emerge as a key theme in our research. The testimony of the psychiatrist in the case from 1956 – in which he explained that “normal people” practice same-sex sex “under irregular conditions” – shows that same-sex sexual contacts were not necessarily perceived at the time as indicative of an inherent abnormal condition. This conceptualization aligns with the testimonies gathered in our study. A few of the men who served during the 1950s reported sexual contact with fellow male soldiers during their service. One specific recollection involved an entire platoon participating in regular sexual activities with the narrator – all performing the “active” sexual role, while the narrator performed the “passive” role, thus maintaining the “normalcy” of the other men. An additional recollection involved a circle of gay officers in the Air

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41 E.g., Steven Zeeland, *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line Between “Straight” and “Gay” in the U.S. Navy* (New York, 1995); Paul Baker and Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor: Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* (London, 2003).
Force, most of them married, who identified servicemen attracted to men and brought them into their underground clique.

Between these two main themes regarding sex between servicemen – avoidance of sexual activity inside military camps and frequent, almost casual same-sex sexual encounters – we heard an array of stories about intimacy in military settings. Many men who had had same-sex experience prior to enlistment exercised, within the army, the same prior caution, discreetly seducing others or responding to them. A few found lovers in the army and experienced, for the first time, a long-term relationship with another man. Yet there were also interviewees who erected a wall between their sexual lives and their military service, seeking sexual partners outside the army in cruising parks, public restrooms, or simply on the street. While some took care to go off uniform in order to distance themselves from the army, probably in fear of retribution should they be caught, others found sexual partners while in uniform, in the public restrooms of bus and train stations on their way to the base or back home. These experiences of same-sex love and intimacy with fellow servicemen proved to be impactful on the development of gay identity for many interviewees.

Except for the two cases involving foreign diplomats, no interviewees had mentioned being caught or suspected of being homosexual, and none recalled other homosexuals being exposed in their surroundings. Could it be that all of them were so careful that suspicions never arose? Were heterosexual soldiers oblivious to the homosexuals in their midst? Or perhaps peers and commanders did not view it as important or meaningful enough to address? The conceptual shift regarding sexuality that occurred in Israel during the 1960s can answer at least some of these questions.

Although the history of gays in the IDF as revealed in this article has its distinctive details related to the cultural, political, and demographic features of Israeli society, it is not fundamentally different from the history of gays in other armed forces a decade or two earlier. As the studies of Bérubé, Jackson, and Vickers show, other armies were also puzzled by the implications of the new conceptualization of male same-sex, and the process of constructing new policies was long and inconsistent. Individual IDF commanders might have been aware of the ways other Western armies wrestled with the issue of homosexuality, but it was not considered an issue in Israeli society until the 1960s. Thus, IDF authorities were not under pressure to shape explicit policies addressing homosexuality before the 1970s.

Israeli male soldiers who were attracted to men, like their British, Canadian, and American counterparts, were struggling, first, to understand the nature of their own sexuality, and second, to find ways to realize their desires without...
putting themselves at risk. The various strategies used by Israeli gay soldiers and their multifaceted experiences may have had particular characteristics related to Israeli circumstances, but they were not fundamentally different from the practices and experiences of gay soldiers in other armies during the Second World War. In Israel, the stringency attested by our youngest interviewees, was attached to the growing awareness of homosexuality and the exacerbating stigmatization of homosexuals during the 1960s and 1970s. It recalled the increasingly hostile official attitude towards gays in other countries’ armies during the post-war period and the Cold War.42

Regarding the primary period covered in this article, one of our older interviewees shared this observation: “That was the situation then. Everybody was busy building the nation and working for its glory. Nobody cared about gays.” When society is focused on collective goals, personal peculiarities and non-normative practices are overlooked as long as they take place discreetly and do not interfere with the collective goals. This is how Vickers explains the relative tolerance toward gays in the British army during the Second World War, and this is how Brom explains the indifference with which kibbutzim accepted the homosexuality of their members.43 Deviance from accepted norms that might sometimes be construed as a threat to the collective good, might be tolerated if it allows “deviants” to take part in the larger goal of “building the nation and working for its glory”. Good soldiers, who were also gay, served the larger goal, and this may explain why their homosexuality, when noticed and even investigated, was not perceived as a danger. At some point in the 1960s and 1970s, this “arrangement” changed. How much, and why, are questions that await future study.

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43 Emma Vickers, “‘The Good Fellow’”; Dotan Brom, “Giora Manor, the Kibbutz, and the Transparent Closet”, in *Queer Jewish Lives between Central Europe and Mandatory Palestine*, eds. Andreas Krass, Moshe Sluhovsky, and Yuval Yonay (Bielefeld, 2021), 293–310.
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