Mata Hari: A Life of Lies

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During the international scandal of her 1917 trial and subsequent execution, Mata Hari’s name became a universal title for a traitorous woman. Since then, spies like Tokyo Rose and Radiant Jade were known respectively as the "Mata Hari of the airways" and the "Mata Hari of the East."¹ However, unlike the other two women, Mata Hari was famous for being a woman who would do anything for a price years before the French accused her of treason, and this image hurt her during the trial as much as the accusations of treason did.

Mata Hari enjoyed a pleasant childhood and led a fairly non-descript life until after her move to the East Indies at age 21. Born August 7, 1876 in Leeuwarden, a small village in the Netherlands, Margueretha Gertruida Zelle was the daughter of small shopkeepers and educated in a convent near The Hague.² July 11, 1895, she married Dutch Army Officer Rudolph Campbell Macleod, a forty year old alcoholic.³ The Macleods had a son and daughter; however, the marriage proved to be an unhappy and abusive one for Margueretha.⁴ In 1897,

Margueretha’s husband was assigned to the Foreign Legion in Java.\textsuperscript{5} There she learned the erotic dances of a local Buddhist Temple and began to call herself “Mata Hari” which translated “Eye of the Dawn.”\textsuperscript{6}

Margueretha returned to the Netherlands in 1902 and divorced her husband in 1906.\textsuperscript{7} After the scandal of being divorced and her husband posted an ad in the papers discrediting her honor, Marguerite found herself penniless and unable to gain work.\textsuperscript{8} Although her husband legally had to pay alimony, it was not enough to cover the costs of maintaining herself and a child.\textsuperscript{9} Leaving her daughter behind, Margueretha traveled to Paris, France in 1905, where she became an Eastern Temple Dancer.\textsuperscript{10}

There can be no doubt that she was a beautiful woman. Photos and her popularity are evidence of her grace and good looks.\textsuperscript{11} Her dancing style consisted of oriental dances blended with “increasing and calculated nudity.”\textsuperscript{12} Mata became an almost instant success while dancing at one party after another and then moving to acting in shows life “Le Reve” and “Salome” thus

\textsuperscript{5} Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010); Proctor, 127; Kultermann, 206; Gollomb, 330, 332; Singer, 142-143. Kurt Singer says the move was in 1895, but most sources place the date closer to 1897. See Singer, 142.
\textsuperscript{6} Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010); Proctor, 127; Kultermann, 206; Gollomb, 330, 332; Singer, 142-143.
\textsuperscript{7} Gollomb, 333; Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010); Maclean, 6; Proctor, 126.
\textsuperscript{8} Ostrovsky, 64; Maclean, 6; Waagenaar, 33.
\textsuperscript{9} Ostrovsky, 64; Maclean, 6; Waagenaar, 34.
\textsuperscript{10} Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010); Kultermann, 206; Ostrovsky, 65. There is no evidence of what happened to her son. Some authors claim that the son was murdered (See Gollomb, 330; Ostrovsky, 49), but research did not reveal primary resources to support this theory. In a letter to her daughter, Mata Hari simply wrote that the child had died, but did not say how. Margarida Gertrud Zelle-MacLeod to Banda, “Mata Hari to Her Daughter,” in Kurt Singer, \textit{The World’s 30 Greatest Women Spies}, (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1951), 149-150.
\textsuperscript{12} Kultermann, 206; Waagenaar, 37-40.
gaining even more notoriety.\textsuperscript{13} As part of her roles, she exhibited a “degree of nudity which even at that time was unknown.”\textsuperscript{14} She later completed one dancing audit completely naked, a shocking move at the time.\textsuperscript{15} In another, she was described as having thrown “away the ornaments that cover her breast. Naked, her body seems to lengthen way up into the shadows!”\textsuperscript{16} Her “sensational abandonment to unrestricted nudity furnished her exploiters with blurbs and photographs that few newspapers would refuse to print,” and the tale of the European seductress swiftly spread throughout the world.\textsuperscript{17}

By 1914, she had abandoned her life as Margueretha MacLeod, wife to a man she abhorred, and had thrown herself into becoming Mata Hari—the most expensive courtesan in Europe.\textsuperscript{18} She claimed to have been born in Jaffnapatam, India on the coast of Malabar, the child of a family within the sacred caste of Brahma.\textsuperscript{19} She said she was dedicated to the Indian goddess Siva, in whose temple she lived, hidden from the world and trained in the “mysteries of love and faith.”\textsuperscript{20} Later, she said a native servant poisoned her son, and she killed the murderer “with her own hands.” Instead of a divorce, she claimed her husband died of fever, and she then made her way to Europe.\textsuperscript{21} However, this story changed from place to place; in some places, she

\textsuperscript{13} Ostrovsky, 73; Waaganaar, 37, 97; Kultermann, 206. At this point, Paris was still in the pre-war glory days; “money was plentiful; society was at its most brilliant; all kinds of excesses were accepted as a matter of course; art in all its manifestations was flourishing—the more luxuriant and exotic, the more successful.” Maclean, 3, 7; Waaganaar, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{14} Kultermann, 206; Gollomb, 330; Waaganaar, 45-47.
\textsuperscript{15} Kultermann, 206; Ostrovsky, 73; Proctor, 127.
\textsuperscript{16} Waaganaar, 45. A photograph of this dance reveals her naked except for the breast plates. “Mata Hari at the Guimet Museum,” March 13, 1905.
\textsuperscript{17} Singer, 142-143; Proctor, 127.
\textsuperscript{19} Singer, 141; Ostrovsky, 71; Maclean, 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Singer, 143; Ostrovsky, 71; Maclean, 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Maclean, 4; Waagenaar, 52; 59. For a more complete description of the many stories regarding her history and their influence on the press. See Waagenaar, 50-59.
was from India, in others she was born on the Island of Marouda, “where her grandfather was Regent.” She had abandoned her past, and created a new personality for the future.

Mata did everything in full view of the public’s eye—“her departures and arrivals were functions attended by a train of admirers.” She dressed as fitting the height of fashion during the time, and then would intersperse her photo shoots with images of her in clothing no respectable woman would wear. Mata Hari encouraged tales naming her an expert “in the sixty-four rites of lust practiced in Hindu temples, the rumors that she had studied love philters, incantations, and amulets with aphrodisiac powers…Legends could only add to her mystery; the exotic was her best ally.” Soon, “passed with improvements from one salon to another, picked up and embroidered by every newspaper in the world, the legend of Mata Hari… reached fantastic proportions.”

Mata claimed that art and erotic dancing were connected to the worship rites of her temple and suggested that prostitution was also a type of worship—one that allowed her to communicate with her deity. She became even more popular after becoming involved in a love triangle in which one of her lovers killed the other. Some of her lovers in France, Russia, and Holland included Colonel-Baron van der Capellen, Marquis de Beaufort, French Calvary officer Jean Hallaure, French Military Attaché General Denvignes, and Captain Vadim Maslov. She received jewels, clothes, expensive housing, and many other elaborate gifts from her lovers, a

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22 Maclean, 10; Waagenaar, 52-53.
24 Ostrovsky, 96.
25 Ostrovsky, 93; Waagenaar, 59; Colson, 280.
26 Maclean, 4; Waagenaar, 60-61; Colson, 280-281.
27 Ostrovsky, 94; Waagenaar, 60.
28 Ostrovsky, 91.
29 Maclean, 11-12; Colson, 277.
fact that thrilled both her ego and her constant need for funds.\textsuperscript{30} Although, she visited several nations in Europe during her travels, she spent more time in Berlin than any other location.\textsuperscript{31}

In Berlin, she began giving “special performances,” which attracted men from an even higher pay grade.\textsuperscript{32} As an excellent dancer, she developed contacts amongst members in the highest circles in Europe.\textsuperscript{33} Her lovers included Berlin’s Crown Prince and other members of Germany’s nobility including the Duke of Brunswick and Von Jagow, the Kaiser’s foreign minister.\textsuperscript{34} They often paid her from illicit funds, including money from the “espionage fund,” a fact the French used as evidence during the trial.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, it was her illicit affairs with “high-profile, older men including politicians and military officers,” that first drew the suspicion of the French.\textsuperscript{36} Their only concept of her was as a woman who frequently traveled, despite the war, who pursued sexual affairs with a variety of officers and public officials, and who relied mainly on lovers for housing, food, and a luxurious lifestyle.\textsuperscript{37}

The move from courtesan to spy was easy for Mata Hari, who enjoyed the money it brought her. In 1915, the French authorities detained and questioned Mata Hari about suspicions that she was a German spy.\textsuperscript{38} She denied their accusations, “boast[ing] of her intimacies with many German leaders,” and offered to become a spy for France, an offer they accepted.\textsuperscript{39} As a French spy, she went to Belgium and then to Spain, and in both locations she held shows and met

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{30} Singer, 143; Ostrovsky, 92.
\bibitem{31} Singer, 144.
\bibitem{32} Ostrovsky, 94.
\bibitem{34} Singer, 144; Maclean, 9.
\bibitem{35} Singer, 144, 146.
\bibitem{36} Proctor, 129.
\bibitem{37} Proctor, 129.
\bibitem{39} Singer, 145-146; Howe, 89-91; Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” \http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfm\ (Accessed April 5, 2010).
\end{thebibliography}
numerous lovers amongst the German army. In Madrid, Mata Hari made connections with numerous German officers who paid her well her services. According to French records, the French later discovered Mata Hari began spying for Germany in 1916 after the French recruited her while she was working as a dancer in Berlin. They then found out that German officers had been paying her for some services although it was unclear what was included in these services.

Then, in 1916, The French Secret Service intercepted German messages incriminating her, and arrested her on February 12, 1917 on charges of being a German double agent. The accusations included the betrayal of information relating to the secret production of tanks for Allied forces. In response to the new information, the Germans began producing anti-tank guns, “with which several of the first tanks were put out of business, although the experiment as a whole was a success.” The evidence was circumstantial and mainly consisted of a confession given after extensive interrogation, an “uncashed 5000 franc check drawn on the bank specified in the German message, and a tube containing what was identified as invisible ink.” Mata Hari

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42 Howe, 121; Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010).
46 Pat Shipman, Femme Fatale: Love Lies and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari (New York: William Morrow, 2007), 337; Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center, Office of Counter Intelligence, “Mata Hari,” http://www.hanford.gov/oci/index.cfmv (Accessed April 5, 2010); Waagenaar, 180-181. She only confessed after hours of intense interrogation over the course of seven interviews interspersed with brief rests in her cell. See Maclean, 18; Proctor, 130; Waagenaar, 181, 185.
claimed the check was payment for her services and the ink was a disinfectant she used as a contraceptive.\textsuperscript{47}

She acknowledged that she corresponded with numerous German officers, but claimed they were only lovers.\textsuperscript{48} In fact, the German officer, whose intercepted letter led to her arrest, was one of her lovers, a fact that raised suspicion later as to whether he was reacting to her abandonment of him for her newer set of conquests.\textsuperscript{49} Her witnesses were a variety of lovers, including those amongst the French military—Jules Cambron, chief of the permanent staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Former Minister of War Missimy; and other men from various walks of life.\textsuperscript{50} Unfortunately, this proof of her unrestrained sexual activity with officers from both Allied and Central armies leant evidence to the impression of a seductive spy.\textsuperscript{51} Her interrogator reported to the court that “A woman such as Mata Hari, with her successive liaisons, could play a useful role in obtaining the half-secrets that fit together” and he denounced her as a “dangerous creature.”\textsuperscript{52} During the trial, the prosecutor claimed, ‘The Zelle lady appeared to us as one of those international women… her numerous relations, her subtle ways, her aplomb, her remarkable intelligence, her immorality, congenital or acquired, all contributed to make her a suspect.’\textsuperscript{53} He went on to decry her “as a sort of Messalina, dragging a horde of admirers behind her chariot.”\textsuperscript{54}

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\bibitem{Singer} Singer, 147; Waagenaar, 181. The tube of ink contained oxycyanide of mercury, a common disinfectant, and available and any pharmacy. See Waagenaar 181. She told the court, that she often received that much money from her lovers. She discussed receiving 30,000 marks from von Jagow and commented, “Thirty thousand marks? My lovers never offered me less.” Singer, 146.
\bibitem{Maclean} Maclean, 20; Proctor, 129.
\bibitem{Proctor} Proctor, 129.
\bibitem{Singer2} Singer, 147; Maclean, 17; Colson, 277.
\bibitem{Maclean2} Maclean, 17; Colson, 279.
\bibitem{Shipman} Shipman, 335; Colson 279-282.
\bibitem{Howe} Howe, 248; Colson, 279.
\bibitem{Howe2} Howe, 248; Colson 280.
\end{thebibliography}
Another mark against her was that France was experiencing a “spy-fever” similar to those the one in America during the McCarthy debacle. Not long after her death, the French Chief of Intelligence, one of the men accusing her, was arrested himself and charged with treason.

Some historians believe the trial was an attempt to take the French people’s minds off the front, and provide the French with a scapegoat for their problems during the war. Her prosecutor was André Mornet, who later gained fame as the prosecutor of Marshal Henri Pétain, France’s Chief of State during the war. Her defense was Maitre Clunet, an older man who had been one of her lovers. When the court adjourned the night before the verdict, “the jury had nothing but impressions… of a woman who had lived brilliantly… and who had had many lovers… one of guilt based on an accumulation of accusations.”

The French courts found Hari guilty of committing espionage from 1916-1917, and, despite her claim of innocence, a military court condemned her to death on July 25, 1917. The trial lasted for two months, and she appealed the court’s decision. Nevertheless, on August 17, a revision court-martial rejected her appeal, and the courts informed her of her fate at her residence in the Saint Lazare prison.

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56 Waagenaar, 197, 263; Howe, 267-268.
57 De La Grange, 619; Maclean, 21.
59 Maclean, 21.
60 Waagenaar, 276.
On October 15, 1917, a firing squad shot Mata Hari to death. The French never learned from Mata Hari the whole story—“those whom she worked with or whose orders she followed.” She had slept with numerous Allied and Central Powers’ officers, but many felt that even if she was a spy, “she was not a very competent spy. She produced very little information and the quality was rather poor.” The French files regarding her case are still closed.

Even after her death, the newspapers and magazines focused as much attention on the scandal of her life before the trial as it did on her supposed treachery. One author noted, “When the time came for her fellow intrigants to disclaim this plaything of politicians and spymasters, the material for her perpetuation was in the files of every newspaper worth the name. For she had been promoted as a sensational dancer. She was proclaimed a modern Delilah who had shorn a hundred Samsons.” Another historian wrote, “Mata Hari captured the public imagination precisely because her invented self—a mysterious, “foreign,” and erotic being—fit perfectly the sexualized myth of women spies constructed in the years before and during the war…. She represented the decadence of Salome with her exotic dancing, the hidden female threat with her sexual exploits, and the enemy within through her espionage.”

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
69 Singer, 141
70 Proctor, 126.
Margueretha Zelle’s life was filled with drama and scandal, particularly after her divorce, a fact that damaged her during the trial. She purposely developed a persona of the mysterious, seductive female who willing offered sexual favors in return for money and material possessions. The military court convicted her of treason, although the evidence was mostly circumstantial. Unsurprisingly, Mornet used her sexual relationships with men from numerous armies, including those on opposing sides, and her history of lavish living in Berlin against her during the trial. Since her death, the legend grew even larger as books, movies, plays, documentaries, historians, journalists, and a variety of articles exaggerated and varied the story bits at a time. As one historian noted: “Mata Hari died not for her great success as a master spy but because she was a symbol of the contagion of decadence and that treason seemed to be undermining France, especially in 1917.”

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71 Companies such as A&E and MGM have produced both biographies and fictional accounts of her life, the most famous being Greta Garbo’s Mata Hari. See Greta Garbo, and Ramon Novarro, Mata Hari, VHS, Directed by George Fitzmaurice, Culver City, CA: MGM, 1932; Sylvia Kristel, and Christopher Cazenove, Mata Hari, DVD, Directed by Curtis Harrington, Culver City, CA: MGM, 2005; Proctor, 126.

72 Proctor, 126.
Bibliography

Primary Resources


Garbo, Greta, and Ramon Novarro, Mata Hari, VHS, Directed by George Fitzmaurice, Culver City, CA: MGM, 1932.


**Secondary Resources**


Spy and Terrorist Briefing Center. Office of Counter Intelligence. “Mata Hari.”


Articles


