

Mata Hari consorted with many prominent men, but none stepped forward to save her from a firing squad.

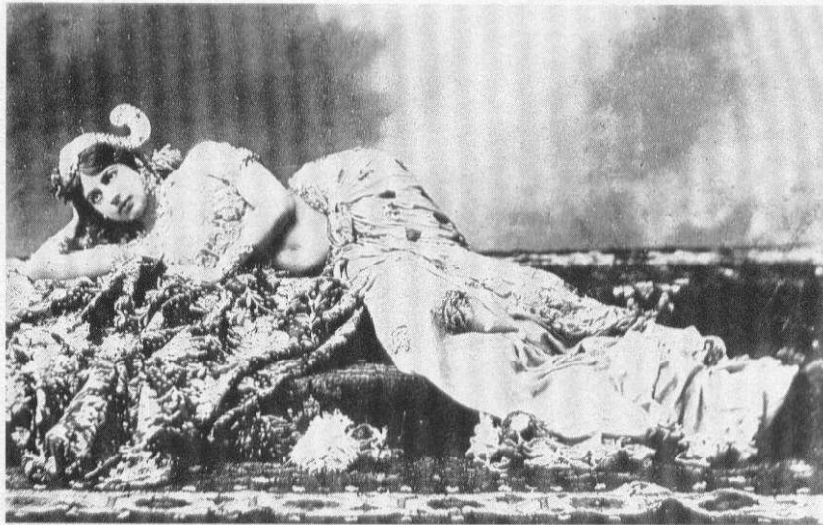
By C. David Coveney

Her long, snakelike limbs writhed with sensuality to the Eastern music that flowed from the strings of a lone sitar. Her graceful body glided smoothly back and forth as torchlight shone on her bejeweled silver brassiere and made her dark, tanned skin glisten, while the smell of incense filled the air. The dance was the Ketjoeboeing, named after a rare Indonesian flower said to bloom and die in only a single night.

Mata Hari means "Eye of the Dawn," and that was the name the exotic dancer used while performing. But offstage she would appear dressed in formal attire and be presented as Lady MacLeod. Mata Hari—or Lady MacLeod, depending on the occasion—often told the press and the public that her mother had died at her birth, and that she had been raised as a dancer in an Indian temple.

In reality, Margarethe Geertruide Zelle was born in the Dutch town of Leeuwarden on August 7, 1876. Her dark complexion and blue-black hair reflected the Gypsy blood in her veins, but she was not East Indian. Her mother actually did die while she was young, and for a while thereafter her father, Adam Zelle—a tradesman with aristocratic pretensions—pampered her until he went bankrupt. Then he deserted his children.

At age 18, Margarethe Zelle answered a newspaper ad from a man seeking a wife, placed partly as a joke on behalf of Campbell MacLeod, a 38-year-old army officer of Scottish origin who was on leave from the Dutch East Indies. What began as a lark ended up as a real romance. The couple soon married, and in 1897 they moved back to Java, in what is now Indonesia. While there, Margarethe adopted the local costume and studied and performed Javanese folk dances. She had a son, who died in infancy, and a daughter. She also fought incessantly with her alcoholic, abusive and adulterous husband.



Margarethe Zelle at the peak of her career as exotic dancer—and suspected double agent—Mata Hari. The air of mystery she embraced was ultimately her downfall.

BROWN BROTHERS

A year after the couple returned to Holland in 1901, MacLeod left her, taking their daughter with him. Margarethe regained custody of her daughter in court, then left the child with relatives in 1905.

Moving to Paris, Margarethe reinvented herself as an exotic dancer, making her debut at the Musée Guimet and moving on to salons and theaters through the impresarios she came to know. As Mata Hari, she proclaimed herself a devotee of the Hindu god Siva, but the French who later arrested her described her as a Protestant (her family had been of the Dutch Reform sect).

She was a striking woman, tall and lithe—at 5 feet 9 inches, taller than most men of that time. But an artist she had once posed for revealed that she was not as voluptuous as she appeared on stage. The metallic brassiere she wore concealed falsies.

Mata Hari's growing reputation as the most exotic sexual delicacy of the City of Light enabled her to live in fine homes and hotels throughout Europe, modifying her act to entertain an international clientele. She even danced in a private salon for lesbians. When performing for conservative Catholic clients, she wore a bodysuit. Mata Hari appeared in many theatrical productions and sometimes performed for charities. She was also a courtesan, and her conquests included Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Germany.

By 1914, Mata Hari was nearly 38 and beginning to lose her figure. Still, when World War I broke out in July, she was booked to star in a show in Berlin and was seen with the chief of police—who, it was later alleged, recruited her as a spy at that time. Mata Hari herself said that she had a hard time leaving the country, losing her furs in the process, and that she had agreed to work as a spy for the Germans, with the intention of later double-crossing them in revenge.

In 1915, Mata Hari returned to her villa in Neuilly, outside Paris. As a Dutch neutral, she traveled freely, in relative luxury and under almost universal suspicion. Her intimate affairs with numerous prominent men would have helped her function as a spy.

Depending on the account, Mata Hari was either detained by French authorities or sought them out to obtain permission to see Vadim Masloff, a 21-year-old Russian pilot who had lost an eye in combat and was hospitalized in a restricted area in France. In either case, when Captain Georges Ledoux, the new chief of French counter-intelligence, stated that he knew she was spying for the Germans, she vehemently denied the charge and then impetuously offered her services to France—either to prevent her deportation, for money, or for a pass to see her Russian lover.

To test her loyalty, Ledoux dispatched Mata Hari to Belgium, with a list of six undercover agents who would help her while in that German-occupied country. Soon after her arrival there, one of the six was arrested and shot, but despite rumors that he had been betrayed by a woman, the French gave Mata Hari another assignment, this time in Madrid.

After visiting the headquarters of General Moritz von Bissing, governor-general of Belgium, Mata Hari entered the Netherlands and departed from there for neutral Spain. Her ship was detained at Falmouth,

England, however, and she was brought before Sir Basil Thomson, chief of the Special Branch in London, who accused her of being a German agent identified as Clara Bendix. Mata Hari admitted to being a spy, but insisted that she was in French service. Thomson did not believe her but released her with an entreaty to give up the dangerous game she was playing.

In Madrid, Mata Hari contacted the German naval and military attachés, but by then, they were no more sure than the French that she could be trusted. Near the end of 1916, the attachés received a cable from Berlin—using a code that the Germans knew the French had broken—that “agent H-21” was too expensive to justify the routine information she provided, and therefore should be sent back to France to receive a final payoff of 5,000 francs. Other transmissions in the same code referred to some local gossip that could have only come from Mata Hari, indicating to the French that she was still working for Germany.

On February 12, 1917, Mata Hari returned to Paris, collected a check for 15,000 pesetas and registered at the elegant Hotel Plaza-Athenée on the Avenue Montaigne. The French arrested her the next day, finding her still-uncashed check in her bedroom. After waiving her right to counsel, Mata Hari was taken to cell 12 in Saint-Lazare prison. While being questioned two days later, she admitted that she had agreed to

spy for the Germans. That, by itself, was an offense under French law, but anyone experienced in criminal law knows that suspects often inadvertently make admissions of guilt without realizing that they are doing so.

After months of inconclusive interrogation, Mata Hari was secretly tried by court-martial on July 24. She was not allowed to cross-examine witnesses and was represented by a retired corporate lawyer who had once been a lover—a questionable choice for a capital case. Although nothing but circumstantial evidence and rumor could be found to support the charge that she had actually committed espionage, she was convicted and sentenced to death on the following day. Mata Hari indignantly declined her counsel’s offer to seek a stay of execution on the grounds that she was pregnant with his child. When she made her own appeal, the appellate court would not allow her trial lawyer to appear. He arranged for other counsel, but that lawyer failed to appear for the hearing. Instead, he sent yet a third lawyer, who merely left the case “in the hands of the court.” The appeal was dismissed. Later, executive clemency was refused.

When she was finally driven to the Chateau de Vincennes outside Paris for execution on the morning of October 15, the doomed woman chose to go in the persona of Lady MacLeod, wearing a large straw hat, a corset, a stylish pearl-gray dress, and

silk stockings with fashionable shoes. Reasserting herself for her final performance, she dramatically refused a blindfold as she stood before a 12-man firing squad.

In life, Mata Hari had been one of the most sought-after women of her day. In death, nobody claimed her body, which went to a medical school for dissection.

After she was executed, a legend grew that thousands of French soldiers had died because of her espionage, but there was no hard evidence to support it. After the costly failure of General Robert Nivelle’s spring offensive of 1917, a major portion of the French army had mutinied. A spy scare, capped off by the sacrifice of a courtesan, had provided the French high command with a convenient explanation to give their troops for their heavy losses.

The record of the trial was sealed for 100 years in the interests of national security, but in 1985, French authorities allowed reporter Russell Warren Howe to look at the file and take notes. Howe was convinced that the evidence did not prove her guilt. In his book *Mata Hari, the True Story*, he mentioned that the former head of military justice read the file in 1932. While he could not reveal its contents, the French colonel came to the same conclusion—Mata Hari should never have been convicted. Those findings, however, came far too late to help one of the most intriguing women of the early 20th century. □