

Mata Hari: Good Spies Don't Get Famous

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The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics, making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter—all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Mata Hari: The name's synonymous with sexy femme fatales, but she was a terrible spy. Maybe if she'd been a better dancer....

Namedropping:

Hari, Mata (1876-1917)
aka Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod,
nee Zelle
(pron. maw-ta har-ee)

The Basics:

Working under the guise of an exotic dancer, legend has it that Mata Hari (her stage name, Malayan for “eye of dawn”) joined the German secret service in 1907. She acquired military secrets from Allied French officers by seducing them and betraying their secrets to the Germans. (Talk about pillow talk.) Never fully trusting her, the Germans eventually sold her out to France where she was executed in 1917.

Margaretha grew up in the Netherlands. Growing to a height of 5'10" she had long, thick black hair, olive skin, exotic looks, grace and style. Imagine a Dutch Salma Hayek and you'll get the picture.

After a nasty marriage to a Dutch military officer, ending when both of her children were poisoned (perhaps from a badly-treated servant), Margaretha dumped the chump and moved from Java to gay Paris. Hoping for a new life, she reinvented herself as exotic dancer Mata Hari in 1905 (kinda like when Prince became the Artist Formerly Known As Prince). Margaretha quickly emerged as the Madonna of her time—a talented, world-famous dancer who could really move her hips.



In her late thirties, the dancing gave way to hooking, and Mata Hari slept with more than a few German military officers. Lo and behold, it led to a military job. The facts about her espionage activities are a bit hazy, and it's diffi-

cult to tell if she was a double agent for the French, a German lackey or just a divorcee with an overactive imagination. One thing's for sure: Her courtesan work didn't pay the bills. Despite a slew of wealthy patrons, Mata Hari was coming up short each month, so to make ends meet, she made deals to deliver information for cash.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Not to be outdone by French or German intelligence, the British government arrested Mata Hari, claiming she was actually a spy named Clara Benedix. They had to let her go not long after though, due to a complete lack of evidence - a setback that didn't stop the French from having her executed.

Legend has it that Mata Hari stopped the firing squad in their tracks by unbuttoning her dress at “Aim!” In actuality, she died bravely but was never properly buried; no one had the guts to claim her body.

In the years following Mata Hari's death, the dancer/courtesan/spy became a legend—“the world's greatest woman spy.” Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Sylvia Kristel and Jeanne Moreau all portrayed her on screen. Secret agent or not, she makes for a great story.

Conversation Starters:

- Mata Hari's prosecutor, Andre Mornet, said in an interview 40 years after her death: “There wasn't enough (evidence) to whip a cat.”
- Mata Hari met her husband through a personal ad in the newspaper (just think if there'd been online dating back then...)
- She never removed a cotton garment covering her chest—even with “clients”; a tattoo, perhaps? No, according to her doctor, she was just shy about her small breasts.
- The French confiscated an unusual ointment from her apartment and tried to prove it was disappearing ink. The truth? Lab results confirmed it was birth control.
- Mati Hari, like Elvis, had a reputation for turning up years after her death. In reality, she was dissected at the University of Paris Med School. (Thankyouverymuch.)
- Sometimes called the “second-oldest profession” (Mata Hari practiced both), spying has been going on since Biblical times.
- Speaking of heating up the oven, believe it or not Julia Childs had a turn in the service. Prior to slicing and dicing, Childs had a turn in the OSS during World War II.
- Can't get enough spy stories? Visit The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.