

Saint-Lazare's most famous prisoner: Mata Hari

By

Rev. Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D.

In its long history as a women's prison, Saint-Lazare had no more famous inmate than the ill-fated Mata Hari. Executed by the French as a German spy in 1917, the dancer and courtesan remains an exotic and mythical figure in the history of modern espionage.

Born in the Netherlands in 1876, Margaretha Geertruida Zelle married Rudolf John MacLeod in 1895. MacLeod was a Dutch army officer twice her age. The couple moved to the Dutch East Indies where MacLeod was stationed as a member of the colonial army. While in Indonesia, Margaretha adopted the stage name and persona of "Mata Hari." She also studied local dance traditions. The couple had two children, returned to the Netherlands in 1902, and divorced soon after.

Margaretha moved to Paris in 1903 where she eventually gained fame as an exotic orientalist performer in the city's vibrant dance scene. Risqué semi-nude postcards were part-and-parcel of her carefully cultivated public image. She had a long string of prominent lovers, and a well-deserved continental reputation for a Bohemian lifestyle.

During the war, as a citizen of a neutral country (the Netherlands), Mata Hari moved freely between the combatant countries. She conducted high-profile affairs with high ranking military officers, government officials, and diplomats on both sides of the conflict.

In late 1916, French military intelligence intercepted German messages that identified a spy whose code name was "H 21." British intelligence suggested that Mata Hari be considered a

prime suspect.¹ On the morning of February 13, 1917, a surprised Mata Hari was arrested in her room at the Plaza Hotel Athénée in Paris. By evening she was entering the gates of Saint-Lazare.

The prisoner was first placed in solitary confinement under 24 hour supervision, but she soon became ill and was sent to the prison infirmary. Mata Hari was eventually assigned the famous “Cell #12” which had previously housed such high profile prisoners as Henriette Caillaux and Marguerite Steinheil. She was also placed under the watchful care of Sœur Léonide, the venerable superior of the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph who staffed the prison. She was given permission to take a short walk each day in the prison courtyard. Both the Protestant and Catholic chaplains visited her, but with little effect since she professed no particular religious belief.

As she was charged with espionage, the investigation and subsequent trial on July 24th were conducted in closed court rooms by the military under the authority of the *Conseil de Guerre*. Publicity was minimal.² Seven charges were brought forward specifying that: in 1916 the accused had contacts with enemy agents in Spain, Holland, and France, and that while in Spain she had provided German agents with information about an upcoming French offensive.³

Mata Hari’s lawyer was Edouard Clunet. She felt that her arrest was “unjust” and had been a “mistake” on the part of the authorities. For a long while it seems she believed that the worst fate that awaited her was to be expelled from France, or sentenced to hard labor.⁴ At trial her lawyer denied she was a spy and explained her behavior simply by acknowledging her

¹ Arthur Bernède, “Mata-Hari,” *Libre du Livre national* (Paris: Jules Tallandier, 1931), 302.

² For example, *The New York Times*, which had reported previous high profile trials in Paris in great detail, published only four, brief, paragraph-long dispatches from Paris about the Mata-Hari affair. The following from July 27, 1917, was typical: “A military court today condemned to death for espionage a danger known as Mata Hari who before her marriage was Marguerite Zell. She was born in the Dutch East Indies and claims Dutch nationality.”

³ *Opt cit.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

personal fascination with, and sexual attraction to, senior military officers (irrespective of their nationality).⁵ At most Mata Hari admitted her lovers may have at times shared military information with her, but she steadfastly denied ever passing this information on to the Germans.⁶ Her lawyer's summation was brief: "Mata Hari has been a courtesan, but never a spy. She is innocent, and I submit that she should be acquitted."⁷ After ten minutes of deliberation the military tribunal returned a verdict of guilty. The sentence was death. Mata Hari was remanded back to Saint-Lazare.

The condemned woman returned to Cell #12. Two other prisoners were specially chosen to share her cell so that she would never be alone at night. Sœur Léonide kept constant watch over her during the day. As a condemned capital prisoner Mata Hari could avail herself of several special privileges. Such prisoners were able to smoke and had access to reading materials. Since she neither smoked, nor enjoyed reading, she did not avail herself of these opportunities. However, she did avail herself of access to better-than-average prison fare. She also would have been able to receive visitors, letters, and flowers, but none ever arrived. Three letters that she wrote were returned by the recipients unopened.⁸

A post-war fictionalized account of her last days at Saint-Lazare introduced the legend that under the influence of an "*élan de diabolique ivresse sensuelle*," she had danced nude in her cell one last time until the guards called the sisters on duty *pour l'exorciser*.⁹

Mata Hari's sentence was reaffirmed at two levels of appeal and review. By September 27th there was only one more route open, to plead for clemency. M. Chaunet sought and

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ E. Gomez Carrillo, *Le Mystère de la Vie et de la Mort de Mata Hari* (Paris: Librairie Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1925), 49.

received an audience with the President of the Republic, Raymond Poincaré. There would be no clemency. On October 14th the military orders for the execution were issued. Before dawn on the morning of the fifteenth the official delegation arrived at Saint-Lazare. They woke Mata Hari with the news: “Zelle, have courage. The president of the Republic has rejected your appeal. The hour of expiation has arrived!”¹⁰ The newly-awakened prisoner was at first incredulous, but then told Sœur Léonide: “Have no fear, sister, I will approach death without faltering. You will see a good death.”¹¹

The sisters helped the prisoner dress.¹² Pastor Jules Abroux, the Protestant chaplain, appeared and fulfilled Mata Hari’s request to be baptized. The senior military officer, Captain Thibaut, was required by law to ask one last time if she wanted to sign a confession. She refused. When asked if she had any last requests she took ten minutes to write three farewell letters. When these were finished, Mata Hari, accompanied by Sœur Léonide and Pastor Abroux, descended to the prison court yard. The motorcade left Saint-Lazare as the city around them still slept. Their destination was the fortress at Vincennes just outside Paris where a military firing squad awaited the condemned.

Because of wartime secrecy, the full publicity which certainly would have accompanied Mata Hari’s arrest, imprisonment, and execution in 1917 did not fully emerge until after the armistice. However, beginning in the 1920s countless books, articles, movies, and

¹⁰ *Op cit.*, 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Later legend claimed that Mata Hari had worn an overcoat, and when the time came for her execution she had opened it to reveal her nude body. This is an example of the type of fictionalization that continues to haunt her story. Eyewitnesses unanimously testified that at her execution she wore the clothing she had worn to trial. Also, there was no point at which she was left alone unsupervised in her last hours.

documentaries have tried, and are still trying, to separate fact from fiction with respect to Saint-Lazare's most famous prisoner: Mata Hari.¹³

¹³ Including a famous 1931 film entitled *Mata Hari* starring Greta Garbo and Raymond Novaro. To see the movie trailer visit: <http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/index.jsp?cid=32087> (accessed November 15, 2010).