

# Mata Hari

August 7, 1876  
Leeuwarden, Netherlands  
October 15, 1917  
Paris, France

Exotic dancer and courtesan



**M**ata Hari has gone down in history as one of the most notorious and exotic spies involved in World War I. Yet there is some evidence that her celebrated conviction for spying for the German army may have been based on false evidence. In fact, Mata Hari may not have been a spy at all. Rather, it is possible that she was a victim of a frantically suspicious world at war; unable to see the danger around her, she may have trapped herself in an attempt to make quick money. The whole truth about Mata Hari may never be known, but she was a flamboyant woman with a flair for the dramatic, so perhaps she would be pleased to know that her legend and her mystery live on.

## A Childhood in the Netherlands

Mata Hari's original name was Margaretha Geertruida Zelle. She was the only girl of four children. Born in the ancient town of Leeuwarden, in the northern part of the Netherlands, Margaretha had striking looks and a dramatic nature even as a child. The only one in her family with dark hair and dark eyes, she took to telling people that she was half

"I am a neutral, but my sympathies are for France. If that does not satisfy you, do as you will."

—Mata Hari, quoted in Erika Ostrovsky, *Eye of Dawn: The Rise and Fall of Mata Hari*.

**Mata Hari.** Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.

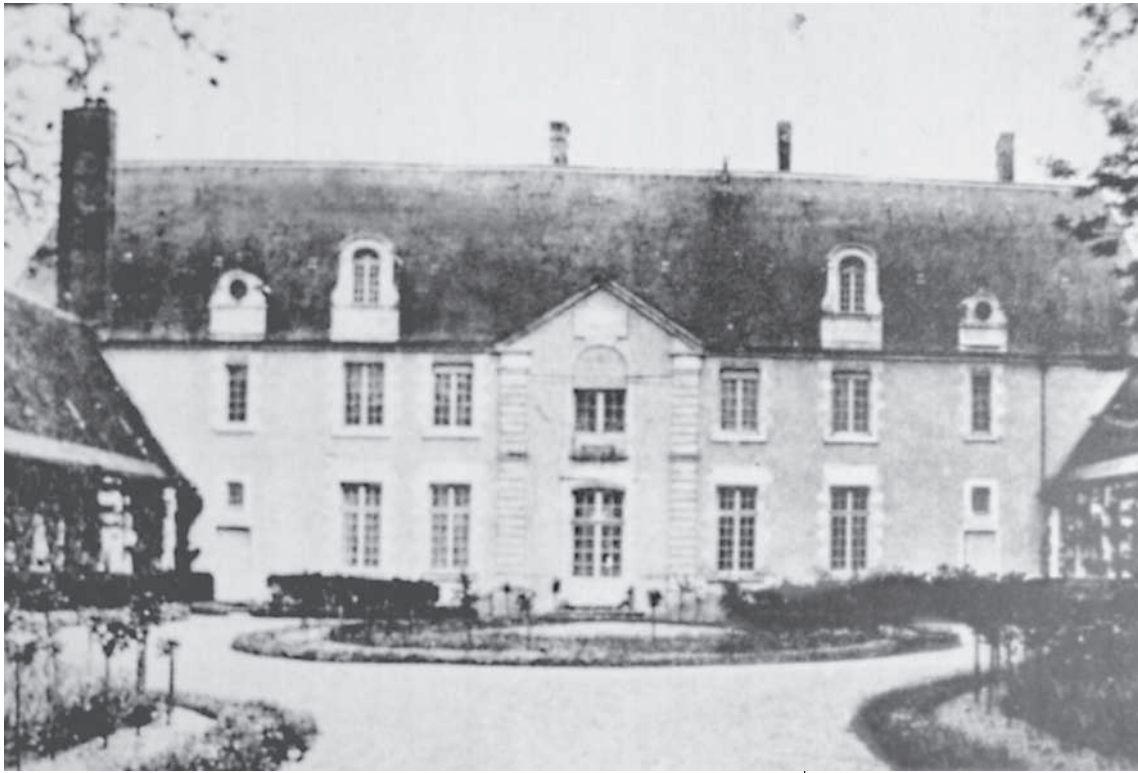
Indian or Indonesian. Adam Zelle, Margaretha's father, was a hatmaker. The family was only middle class, but Zelle was a pompous man who liked to dress and act like a fine gentleman. Though the neighbors often laughed at her father's bright clothes and fancy airs, Margaretha adored him. She was his special favorite, and as his hat shop prospered, he showered his little girl with gifts and affection.

However, Margaretha's happy childhood was cut short. When she was only thirteen, her father's business failed. The public shame of having no money when they had always put on a show of wealth was bad enough; it was worse, however, when her father abandoned the family. Within a year, her mother died, physically and emotionally broken by their troubles. The children were scattered among relatives; Margaretha was sent to live with her godfather in the tiny town of Sneek, not far from Leeuwarden. From there she was sent to school in nearby Leyde to learn to be a teacher.

### **Loss of Innocence and Escape through the Personal Ads**

Margaretha did not learn to be a teacher, however. She had not been in school long when the headmaster noticed that his new student was strikingly beautiful. Though Margaretha was only fifteen, the headmaster began to pay her special attention, looking at her and touching her in ways that were appropriate for a lover, not a teacher. After a while, the other teachers and students noticed how the headmaster pursued Margaretha, and she was sent away from the school to stay with another relative.

Margaretha began to long for a family of her own and started reading the marriage ads in the local newspaper. One day she ran across a promising advertisement that had been placed by a captain on leave from service in the Dutch army. She answered the ad, and soon the eighteen-year-old Margaretha met the thirty-eight-year-old Captain Campbell MacLeod. Four months later, on July 11, 1895, they were married and traveled to Java, which was part of the Dutch East Indies (Dutch-controlled islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans). Though Margaretha had wanted to travel and have adventures, her marriage was not a happy one. By 1902, she



and MacLeod had separated bitterly. Of their four children, one had died of disease, and two had been poisoned by a servant; her husband, who had turned out to be a brutal man, took the only surviving child from her.

### **The Birth of Mata Hari**

Heartsick and penniless after her failed marriage, Margaretha was still resourceful and hopeful. She went to Paris to seek work as an artist's model. She was unsuccessful at that, but she found another career that suited her much better. While living in Java with her husband, Margaretha had learned some of the sensual, snake dances that were sacred to the native people there. It was there, too, that she had first been given the name Mata Hari, which is a Malay expression meaning "eye of dawn" or "morning sun." In glittering Paris at the turn of the century, she found new uses for what she had learned during her unhappy marriage. Taking advantage of her exotic good

**A photograph of Mata Hari's home in France.**

looks, in 1905 Margaretha Geertruida Zelle became known as Mata Hari, the famous dancer.

Mata Hari gained wide fame as a dancer, combining the movements she had seen in Java with moves that she simply made up. Though she pretended to be a priestess from India dancing sacred religious rituals, her dances were very sexual. As she danced, she removed her clothes, becoming one of the first striptease dancers. Audiences loved her. After wild success in France, she performed her “sacred temple dances” in glamorous theaters from Spain to Egypt and became one of the most famous celebrities of her day. Although dance critics called her a fraud, many people were captivated by Mata Hari’s mystery and sexuality.

It was not easy for a woman to earn a living on her own, but along with dancing, Mata Hari always had lovers to support her. She became the mistress to many men of high position during her dancing career, and when one relationship broke up, she would search for another. As she grew older and her fame as a dancer began to fade, she depended more and more on her affairs with men. A woman who receives money for having sexual affairs with wealthy men is called a courtesan, which is really the same as a prostitute.

## Surviving in a World at War

When World War I broke out in August 1914, Mata Hari’s constant travels around Europe, and her affairs with men on both sides of the war, brought her to the attention of the Allied authorities. They became convinced that she was a German spy. A French officer, Georges Ladoux, decided to try to get Mata Hari to become a double agent; in other words, he wanted her to pretend to continue to work for the Germans while actually spying for the Allies. There is little evidence that Mata Hari ever worked as a spy for the Germans, but she did accept Ladoux’s proposal, agreeing to spy on the Germans for the French in exchange for good pay. There is also little evidence that she had strong political loyalty to either side. In fact, Mata Hari was a woman who had learned to do what she had to do to survive.

Though it is hard to know exactly what happened, it seems likely that Mata Hari did offer to spy for the Germans so



## The Legend Lives On

The records of Mata Hari's trial were sealed by the French government for one hundred years, so the whole truth of her guilt or innocence will remain a mystery at least until the year 2017. However, the image of the glamorous, exotic spy captured the public imagination, and the name Mata Hari has remained famous for decades. Filmmakers began making movies of her life only two years after her death, and since then, artists in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the United States, and other countries have created dozens of films, novels, and plays based on the dramatic life of Mata Hari. She has been portrayed by well-known actresses from many different countries, including

Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Jeanne Moreau. Even a cartoon show and an Internet search engine have been named for the famous spy.

Most of these fictional works take great liberties with the real life of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, and most do not question whether she was, indeed, an effective spy for the Germans. However, many historians do question Mata Hari's guilt, and they have worked to clear her name. Her hometown in the Netherlands also hopes to prove Mata Hari's innocence. On the hundredth anniversary of her birth, the city of Leeuwarden opened a museum dedicated to Mata Hari and placed a statue of her nearby.

that she could spy on them for the French. The German officers she was involved with seemed to consider her something of a joke, though they did pay her for sex and gave her some unimportant information to pass along. They even gave her a code name—H21. The money and code name would be used against her during her trial for spying. It was the Germans who actually caused Mata Hari's arrest, by sending a message about her using her code name. Some historians suspect that the Germans did this on purpose, sending a message about Mata Hari in a code they knew the British had broken in order to distract the Allies from finding real German spies.

The French were fighting a hard and bloody war, however, and they took the German message very seriously. On February 13, 1917, Mata Hari was arrested by the French and spent five months in a grim prison in Paris. Her trial for espionage (spying) on July 24 and 25 was short and merciless. Mata Hari

was accused of causing the deaths of more than fifty thousand Allied soldiers by passing vital secrets to the Germans. She was convicted unanimously and sentenced to death. She spent almost three more months in prison before she was taken out of her cell and shot by a firing squad. It is said that she smiled and blew a kiss to the men in the firing squad just before her death. Shortly after Mata Hari's execution, Ladoux, who had been largely responsible for her arrest and conviction, was arrested himself and imprisoned for espionage.

## For More Information

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