

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 151

“The Eye of the Day”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Vague rumours had reached me of a woman from the Far East, a native of Java, wife of an officer, who had come to Europe laden with perfumes and jewels, to introduce some of the richness of the Oriental colour and life into the satiated society of European cities, of veils encircling and discarded, of the development of passion as the fruits of the soil, of a burst of fresh, free life, of Nature in all its strength untrammelled by civilization... Her olive skin blended with the curious jewels in the dead gold setting. A casque of worked gold upon her dark hair—an authentic Eastern headdress; a breast plate of similar workmanship beneath the arms. Above a transparent white robe, a quaint clasp held a scarf around the hips, the ends falling to the feet in front. She was enshrouded in various veils of delicate hues, symbolizing beauty, youth, love, chastity, voluptuousness, and passion...

Francis Keyzner, Paris correspondent for *The King* magazine, February 4, 1905.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Episode 151. The Eye of the Day.

Margaretha Geertruida Zelle was born on August 7, 1876, in Leeuwarden, in the Netherlands. She was the first child and only daughter of Adam and Antje Zelle. Her father was a shopkeeper and his family was one of the wealthiest in town and her father denied his only little girl nothing. When she was six, he gave her a child-sized carriage, drawn by two goats, an exorbitant gift for a small child that made her the talk of the town, not always in a good way among a people noted for their thrift.

But Margaretha apparently enjoyed being the talk of the town, and this was the beginning of a life dedicated to flamboyance and attention seeking. Her father's money got her into the most exclusive girls' school in town, where she learned French and later English and German.

In 1889, when Margaretha was thirteen, her father's business collapsed into bankruptcy, which led to her parents' divorce in 1891. Fifteen-year old Margaretha was sent to live with her

godfather, who placed her in a school that trained kindergarten teachers. It's not clear if she was ever suited to becoming a kindergarten teacher, but the world will never know because the headmaster of the school developed an obsession with the pretty and charming girl—and can I just interrupt the narrative here for a moment to say, *ew!*

Her godfather had a similar reaction. He withdrew Margaretha from the school and sent her to The Hague to live with her uncle. She was by this time seventeen years old, had discovered men, and had discovered how easily she could get men to notice her. And that she liked being noticed. In The Hague were to be found many men in uniform, Dutch colonial soldiers home on leave from the distant East Indies. Margaretha would later say that it was at this moment of her life that she fell in love with “the uniform,” although it might be more accurate to say with “men in uniform.” Her taste for men in uniforms would remain with her for the rest of her too-short life.

At this moment in history, the East Indies were the crown jewel of the Dutch colonial empire. The Netherlands had had a tenuous hold on the region for centuries that began with trade outposts, but the Dutch began to get serious about controlling the whole archipelago in the 19th century. First they entirely subdued the populous island of Java and then spent the rest of the century expanding their control outward from there, fighting a number of wars against various small kingdoms in the region to bring them under Dutch rule.

In one of those wars, the Dutch fought to annex the Sultanate of Aceh, which lay on the northern part of the island of Sumatra. This fight lasted decades during the late 19th century and into the early years of the twentieth century before the Dutch imposed their rule over Aceh, and even afterward the people of Aceh kept up a guerilla resistance. One of the Dutch soldiers who fought in this war was an officer named Rudolph MacLeod, who was Dutch, though as his name suggests he also had Scottish ancestors. MacLeod had served in the Dutch East Indies for seventeen years and had returned to The Hague on medical leave in 1894, at the age of 38. While in The Hague, MacLeod befriended a newspaper reporter who decided that the morose MacLeod was lonely and needed a wife. On a lark, he took out an ad in his own paper which read, “Officer on leave from Dutch East Indies would like to meet girl of pleasant character—object: matrimony.” For the benefit of you younger listeners, think of this as a primitive form of Craigslist.

To MacLeod's considerable surprise and discomfiture, the ad drew a number of responses from interested young women, but only one of them was shrewd enough to enclose a photograph of herself, and her youthful beauty caught MacLeod's eye. It was Margaretha Zelle.

They began a correspondence and after some time agreed to a date, at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. Both of them must have liked what they saw there, for six days later, they were engaged, and married three months after that. Rudolph was twenty years older than Margaretha.

In 1897, a year and a half into their marriage and with an infant son, Rudolph's medical leave ended and he returned to the Dutch East Indies with his family. They had a second child, a

daughter, there, but it was not a happy time. Their son died before his third birthday. Rudolph drank heavily. He beat Margaretha. He kept a Javanese mistress on the side, which was a common practice at the time, unfortunately. He was also jealous of his much younger wife and all the attention she got from the lonely single Dutch soldiers stationed so far from home.

In 1902, the couple returned to Amsterdam, and shortly afterward, they divorced. Margaretha was granted custody of their surviving child and a monthly alimony, although it appears Rudolph never actually paid a penny of it. The destitute Margaretha was unable to find work, and eventually gave up her daughter to her ex-husband and ran off to Paris. She would explain this later by saying, “I thought all women who ran away from their husbands went to Paris.”

The now 28-year-old Margaretha had never been to Paris. She had no money. But this was the Paris of the Belle Époque, the City of Lights, the city that would embrace avant-garde artistic figures like Pablo Picasso and Isadora Duncan and Sergei Diaghilev, a city hungry for the new and exotic and provocative, and Margaretha took to Paris like a duck takes to water.

Not that she didn't struggle at first. She worked as an artists' model and rode horses in a circus—she had learned to ride a horse in the East Indies and was reputed to be quite good at it. It was her employer at the circus who first suggested to her that she had the looks and the grace to become a dancer. There was no shortage of opportunities for beautiful women dancers in Paris, but Margaretha had no training. Oh, she could dance a quadrille or a waltz, as she had done at social events in the East Indies when she was an officer's wife, but that was nothing special. The same could be said of thousands of other women in Paris.

But she had lived in the exotic East Indies for five years. She had learned to speak Malay and had at least watched some native dances. That was a start. A woman as smart and determined as Margaretha could build a career on that, and she did.

She began as a dancer in the salons of wealthy Parisian patrons of the arts, claiming to be bringing before Western audiences the secret and sacred dances of the mysterious East, all of which seemed to involve her beginning her performance dressed only in jewelry and a few veils, and ending it dressed in even fewer. In her own words, she would later confess that “I never could dance well. People came to see me because I was the first who dared to show myself naked in public.”

She quickly became famous, or notorious, if you prefer. To some, she was infusing Western dance with forms from the mysterious East, in the same way Picasso and Matisse were incorporating Congolese art forms into their paintings, or Sergei Diaghilev was bringing Russian portraiture to Paris. To others, she was just a pretentious stripper, a woman who used Eastern spirituality as a veil to conceal her tawdry act. Parisians were divided. Was she an exotic dancer, or just an...exotic dancer?

As her star rose, she refined both her act and her story. Being a Dutch woman who merely spent a few years on Java was not much of a sales hook, so she took advantage of the fact that she had dark hair and a dark complexion, unusual among the Dutch, or at least perceived that way, to claim that she was born in the East Indies and that she was part Malay. She spoke of secret initiations into the sacred dances of the Buddhists or of the Hindus. Never mind that the people of the East Indies are not predominantly either Buddhist or Hindu, but Muslim, or that India and the Indies are two very different places, thousands of miles apart.

There's something faintly ridiculous about a twenty-something Dutch woman who has lived most of her life in her native country holding herself out as a self-appointed cultural emissary from the mysterious East, but you have to keep in mind that people didn't travel as much back then. They were less well educated generally, and knew much less about cultures and peoples from other parts of the world. Hence the curiosity about these far-off lands.

Even so, she probably wouldn't have gotten away with this for very long without the unexpected assist she got from Émile Guimet, a 68-year old industrial magnate, whose family had gotten rich from the boom in artificial dyes, which were quite the innovation at that time, as we've already discussed. But M. Guimet, besides being extraordinarily rich, also had an interest in Eastern religions. By 1905, he had assembled a remarkable collection of religious art from Central Asia, India, China, and Indo-China, which was then controlled by the French. It was, and is, one of the largest collections of Asian art outside Asia, and it is still on display in our time at the Guimet Museum in Paris.

Guimet embraced Margaretha and her act, inviting her to perform in the rotunda of his museum, a space made up like a Hindu temple and adorned with sculptures of bare-breasted women. The rotunda could only accommodate two or three dozen people at a time, and these soon became some of the hottest tickets in Paris. Now, having enough money to buy truckloads of Asian art, ship it to Paris, and set up a space for the public to come and admire it doesn't necessarily make you any more of an expert in Eastern religions than does, say, spending a few years in the East Indies as a Dutch soldier's wife, but most of Paris was ready to accept M. Guimet as an expert and his endorsement of Margaretha's performances as an imprimatur of authenticity.

Only one element was still lacking. Presenting as an expert on the exotic mysteries of the East a woman with a pedestrian Dutch name is a bit of a hard sell. She needed better branding. Luckily, Margaretha already had an alternative name, a Malay name. She had chosen it for herself during her sojourn in the East Indies. So, say goodbye to Margaretha Geertruida Zelle MacLeod; say hello to Mata Hari.

"Mata" could be read as a shortened form of "Margaretha," and "Mata Hari" means "Eye of the Day" in Malay, a poetic reference to the dawn that, I am told, sounds much more poetic in English translation than it does in the original Malay, but never mind. Mata Hari she became,

and that is the name she will be known by for the rest of her life, and remembered by after her death.

Mata Hari became a sensation. She signed a lawyer, Édouard Clunet, and an agent, Gabriel Astruc, to represent her and moved her act from intimate venues to public theatres. Every time she performed, the press raved, and her fame grew. She was interviewed repeatedly and kept embellishing her life story, never telling it the same way twice. She had been born in the East Indies. She had been born in the East Indies and her mother was half-Javanese. No, she was half-Indian, and her Hindu grandmother was the one who had introduced her to the sacred mysteries.

And whereas most dancers were viewed as little more than hired help, Mata Hari's good looks, flamboyance, and considerable charm won her *entrée* into the highest social circles in Paris. She would perform in the home of some wealthy patron, then afterward change into an evening gown and mingle with the guests. And, not to put too fine a point on it, she slept with many men. Generally wealthy and generous men, and their generosity was soon bringing her more income than her dances were.

In January 1906, Mata Hari performed two weeks in Madrid, her first appearance outside of Paris. M. Clunet, her attorney, gave her a letter of introduction to a friend of his in the Spanish capital. This friend turned out to be Jules Cambon, currently French ambassador to the court of Spain. We've met Jules Cambon before on this podcast. He had been the French ambassador to the US, and he will soon become the French ambassador to Germany, a position he will hold until the war breaks out. You'll recall his brother Paul was also a diplomat, serving as the French ambassador in London. Mata Hari will remain on friendly terms with Jules Cambon, and will develop many more such friendships with influential men across Europe.

From Madrid, she went to Monte Carlo, where she danced in the ballet of Jules Massenet's opera *Le roi de Lahore*, at the Monte Carlo Opera, one of the most prestigious opera companies in the world, which was quite the accomplishment for a self-taught dancer who had begun dancing less than two years ago.

Mata Hari had arrived. No longer was she just a high-class strip tease artist. She was now one of the most celebrated dancers of her time and an entirely self-made woman. The closest analogy I can think of is Isadora Duncan, whom we've met before, back in the Belle Époque days of this podcast. Like Duncan, she was self-taught and self-choreographed. But Duncan was exploring a new and modern form of dance and made no bones about it. Mata Hari was trading on an entirely contrived Oriental mystique. In our day, we would call it cultural appropriation; in 1906 you just have to admire her determination and spirit. And, I might add, her gall.

Her opera performance led her into a close relationship with the composer, Jules Massenet; soon afterward she turned up in Berlin, where she became the mistress of a wealthy aristocrat named Alfred Kiepert, who was also an army officer. By her own account, he had given her hundreds of

thousands of marks over the years. In 1917, this relationship would be entered into evidence against her.

From Berlin, she went on to dance in London and in Vienna, where the critics were more skeptical, although one Viennese newspaper declared, “Isadora Duncan is dead! Long live Mata Hari!” But the theatres were full and the ovations suitably thunderous, and that’s what counts. Her German boyfriend took her on a tour of Europe. She visited Egypt, later claiming falsely that she had also used this opportunity to pop over to India to further refine her dances.

Her career tapered off over the next few years. Not because she did not dance at all or that her work was less in demand. No, it was that her dancing career had to compete with her love life, and it seemed Mata Hari’s many lovers, like that German gentleman companion, offered her a higher salary for work less arduous than dancing, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. She spent a year and a half lodged in a château in rural France, the kept woman of a wealthy Parisian banker. That relationship must have meant a lot to her, considering that she gave up being wined and dined in European capitals for life in the French countryside in a home that, while well appointed, lacked modern conveniences like running water, electricity, or even gas.

And again, this unusual period in her life, when she disappeared from view at the height of her success, would later be entered into evidence against her.

[music: Bizet, *Carmen*, Prelude]

By 1911, Mata Hari’s relationship with that banker was over. He was also broke by this point; whether or not there’s a connection between these two facts I will leave to you to decide. This turn of events left Mata Hari short on cash too, but she had a career to fall back on, and the years 1911 and 1912 mark the peak of her success. She danced in two operas at La Scala, one of the most prestigious venues in the world, although during this period she was also frustrated in two of her grandest ambitions.

First, she wanted to dance with the *Ballets Russes*, the dance company that at this time was at the height of its acclaim, episode 45. After months of effort, her agent had gotten her as far as an opportunity to audition in front of Sergei Diaghilev in Monte Carlo, but she refused, apparently offended by the suggestion that she audition. She did not dance for free for any man, she told her agent. Which seems just as well; one doubts Mata Hari would have fit in very well in the *Ballets Russes*.

Her other ambition was to perform in Richard Strauss’s opera *Salomé*, based on a play by Oscar Wilde. We’ve discussed this work on the podcast before. It’s easier to picture her in this role than as part of the *Ballets Russes*, but it was not to be, even though she went so far as to write a letter to the composer, soliciting his help in winning the part. She did eventually play the role in a private performance, but never on the stage as she had dreamed.

By the year 1912, her prospects were beginning to dim. She was now 35 years old, and while still a lovely woman, she was getting noticeably older. None of us escapes the process of aging, and the profession of sex object doesn't come with life tenure. (I can tell you that from personal experience.) There was no shortage of younger women in Paris who could also dance, and by this time many of them had followed Mata Hari's lead and were offering their own takes on the Sacred Dances of the East gimmick. She haughtily declared that these imitators might know some of the moves, but they had not been immersed in the sacred mysteries as she had, and therefore those movements wanted meaning.

Yeah, whatever. She continued to live a life of flamboyant luxury, although the gigs she was getting were less prestigious by this time and they also paid less. She did private performances, sometimes including lectures on Indian art. She took jobs in musical theatre and at the Folies Bergère, where she performed dances that didn't even pretend to be Eastern.

Since Paris seemed to be losing interest, she queried her agent about work abroad. What about London? What about the United States? What about Berlin?

What about Berlin? Although Mata Hari would eventually be accused of being well connected in Berlin, when she began making her own inquiries into performing there in 1912, the contact she reached out to was a Frenchman, her and our old friend, Jules Cambon, now the French ambassador to the Kaiser's court.

Early 1914 found her in Berlin. She had ambitions of creating an Egyptian ballet she would choreograph herself and she had reconnected with her old lover. A Berlin newspaper ran a gossipy piece about Mata Hari, seen in a restaurant with Mr. K, or Herr K in German. Some went so far as to speculate that Herr K might mean the Crown Prince, or Kronprinz, with a K in German. Rumors abounded about her and the Crown Prince, although there is no evidence to support any of them.

In May 1914, she finally got a gig in Berlin, at the Metropole Theatre, to begin on September 1.

Yeah, that ain't gonna happen. As you well know, the July Crisis came first. The fact that it came while Mata Hari was in Berlin would later be used as evidence against her. But in fact, the outbreak of the war was a disaster for Mata Hari's career. The theatre was closed and she had no work. As a Dutch national, she was free to travel, but she wanted to go back to Paris and the direct route was impossible, obviously. She left Berlin for Switzerland, intending to return to France through that neutral country, but although her baggage crossed the border, she was denied passage and returned to Berlin, now with no money and no clothes. She never did see that baggage again. In Berlin, she met a sympathetic Dutch couple who bought her a train ticket to Amsterdam.

Back in her native Holland, Mata Hari returned to dancing, and also had soon hooked up with a wealthy Dutch aristocrat and military officer named Eduard Willem van der Capellen. Same

song, different verse. She stayed in the Netherlands for over a year, supported by her dancing and her latest lover, although she complained that there weren't enough theatres in the Netherlands and she longed to return to Paris.

In 1915, the German consul in Amsterdam approached Mata Hari and offered her 20,000 francs, or about US\$60,000 in today's money, to go to Paris and to forward to German intelligence any useful information she might acquire there. He also gave her a bottle of invisible ink. We know this because she confessed to it in 1917. She says she took the money, regarding it as compensation from the German government for the loss of her baggage, threw the bottle of ink into a canal, and went about her life with no intention whatsoever of aiding the Germans.

It was her first brush with the world of espionage. Mata Hari, the woman who had relied on her wits and her charm and her skill in concocting a fake identity to become an internationally acclaimed dancer no doubt believed she could also outwit the military intelligence services of the Great War. This would prove to be a fatal miscalculation.

She traveled from the Netherlands to France in December 1915 to collect household goods from her Paris home and ship them to The Hague. It was not possible for a Dutch traveler to proceed overland to France, of course, but neither were foreign passenger ships welcome in French Channel ports during the war, owing to the busy military traffic between Britain and France. The only available route was a roundabout one: from the Netherlands by sea to the port of Vigo in Spain or Lisbon in Portugal, and from either of those cities to Madrid by train. Then an overnight stay in Madrid and another train to Paris the next day, so a three-day journey overall.

She didn't stay in Paris long, but while she was there, she contacted her agent, telling him that she had heard that Diaghilev was still in Paris and trying to find engagements to keep his ballet company going. She told her agent to let Diaghilev know that she was still available to solve all his problems. Nothing came of this, and soon she returned to The Hague.

In the spring of 1916, Mata Hari decided on another trip to Paris. By some accounts, she'd lined herself up a new gentleman friend in that city. As part of these travel plans, she applied for a French visa, which she had no trouble getting, and a British visa, which was unaccountably denied her. This was a surprise. She'd wanted a British visa in the event of a possible stopover in the UK and could not understand why it was denied. She asked the Dutch Foreign Office to help her out. They did. They queried the UK Foreign Office and received a reply telegram stating, "Authorities have reasons why admission of lady mentioned your 74 in England is undesirable."

That must have gotten an interesting reaction in the Dutch Foreign Office, but there's no evidence Mata Hari ever heard about it. She knew only that her visa was denied without explanation. Still, if she were the master spy she would later be made out to be, she surely would have recognized already by this time that she was in trouble. The best guess is that the British had somehow gotten wind of her encounter with the German consul.

[music: Bizet, *Carmen Suite No. 2*]

Mata Hari proceeded with her planned trip to Paris anyway, by way of Vigo and Madrid, but when she reached the French border, she was turned away and forced to stay over in the Spanish border town of San Sebastián. Apparently, the British had warned off the French. Again, if Mata Hari really were a master spy, she would surely have gotten the message by now that her cover was blown. Instead, she wrote out a letter to her old friend in the French foreign ministry, Jules Cambon, expressing her displeasure at being denied entry into France and asking him for help, which is not what you would expect from a master spy, though it is what you would expect from a person accustomed to having things her own way suddenly being denied something she wanted.

The following day, she returned to the border and this time was allowed to cross into France without any trouble. This had nothing to do with Jules Cambon; it was probably carelessness on the part of whoever was working the border post that day. But she made it to Paris, and there the now 40-year old Mata Hari lived the good life once more, supported by multiple lovers, often at the same time. Baron van der Capelle was still sending her money regularly from the Netherlands. She also renewed her acquaintance with a Frenchman she had known before the war, the 26-year old Jean Hallaure, now a French Army lieutenant working for the war ministry, and also took up with a 21-year old Russian aristocrat named Vadim Maslov, who was serving as an officer in one of those Russian army units the czar had sent to the Western Front. All military men, you see. She still had an eye for a man in uniform.

She also still had her skill in taking wealthy men as lovers and persuading them to support her in the lifestyle to which she had long been accustomed. But you see, times have changed. There's a war on. Suspicion, even paranoia, is rampant in military intelligence circles. An unmarried woman, traveling alone across Western Europe, one with fine clothes and manners and no visible means of support, one who speaks multiple languages, who has a history of fraternizing with military officers of many different nations, and who regularly receives cash payments from mysterious benefactors in other countries, well, such a person is bound to attract the attention of those suspicious military intelligence agents.

And in fact, she had. By this time, French military intelligence had men following her, reading her mail, and reporting her every move. There is no sign she was aware of this, not at first anyway, and they found nothing incriminating.

In fact there is no evidence that Mata Hari was engaged in any kind of espionage or had any contact with intelligence officers of any nation, apart from receiving one payoff from a German for work she had no intention of doing. Mata Hari was well practiced in the art of separating wealthy men from their money, and no doubt regarded that little incident as not much different from many other men and many other payments. But again, times have changed. Being an international woman of mystery concocting fantastic fables about her background in order to win

the favors of powerful men was all fun and games during the Belle Époque, but the world of the Great War is very different, and Mata Hari doesn't seem to have grasped the difference.

Her relationship with that young Russian aristocrat appears to have grown serious. She would write that her days spent with Vadim Maslov "whom I love above everything" were "some of the most beautiful days of my life." Whether this relationship was really something special, or whether she always spoke that way of her gentlemen friends is anybody's guess. But in August of 1916, she decided she wanted to go to Vittel, a spa town noted for its mineral waters. Mata Hari had passed pleasant times there before the war, and now she wanted to go again. Besides the opportunity to "take the cure," as they said in those days, it also afforded an opportunity to meet up with Vadim, since Vittel was close to the front lines. Unfortunately for Mata Hari, Vittel's being near to the front lines meant that the town was under martial law, and a foreign national like herself needed a special military permit to travel there. For help with this, she turned to her lover Hallaure. She knew he was a military officer; she did not know that he was working for military intelligence, and when she asked for his help in getting a permit, he referred her to his superior, Captain Georges Ladoux, the head of French military intelligence.

Ladoux knew about her relationship with Hallaure, and he told her so at their meeting. He also knew about Maslov, and told her about that. This was her first warning that French intelligence had taken an interest in her. Ladoux questioned her regarding her attitude toward France. Mata Hari told him that she loved France; it was her second home. Ladoux asked her whether, that being the case, she would be willing to spy for France. It seems clear that by this point Ladoux was already convinced she was a German spy and was either trying to turn her or trick her into incriminating herself. Mata Hari replied only that she would have to think about it. Ladoux asked how much she would charge for her espionage services. Mata Hari told him she would have to think about that as well, but she would give him her answer when she returned from Vittel.

And indeed, she spent two weeks in Vittel with her young Russian lover, two very happy weeks it appears. Afterward, she returned to Paris and blithely returned to Captain Ladoux's office in the war ministry to inform him that she would accept his offer to spy for France, and that her price was one million francs. Ladoux accepted her offer, although there is no evidence she ever actually got a single franc out of the deal. Mata Hari herself would say later that she had wanted to marry Vadim Maslov but feared his family would disown him if they did. The million francs, therefore, was her idea of an amount of money suitable to supporting her and her new husband even if the worst happened. Apparently, she thought of Ladoux as one more man with a fat wallet she could pry open. It was another fatal miscalculation.

Ladoux told her to return to the Netherlands, where he would give her further instructions. She did so, traveling as usual via the roundabout route to Madrid, then Vigo, where she boarded a Dutch passenger ship bound for home. As the ship sailed up the English Channel, the British ordered it diverted to Falmouth, as they sometimes did, to search the ship. They found Mata Hari, searched her baggage and her room, and arrested her.

Now oddly enough, they weren't looking for Mata Hari and didn't know that was who they'd arrested. Her passport read Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod-Zelle, a name that meant nothing to them, but they had mistaken her for Clara Benedix, a German woman suspected of being a spy, and believed "Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod-Zelle" to be an assumed name. The Dutch captain of the ship protested vehemently, telling the British they were making a terrible mistake, but to no avail.

Mata Hari was taken to London and imprisoned. Unsurprisingly, under questioning she denied being a German spy and told them she was Mata Hari and was in fact undertaking an espionage mission at the request of French military intelligence. The British cabled Ladoux and asked him about this. His reply read: "Understand nothing. Send Mata Hari back to Spain."

She spent three weeks in Madrid, in December 1916. She spent her time plying her usual trade and become involved with a French diplomat named Joseph Denvignes and a German diplomat named Arnold von Kalle. By some accounts, she had wheedled information out of von Kalle about German officers and supplies being put ashore in secret in Morocco, to assist those who were fighting a guerilla resistance against the French occupation of their country. She wrote up this information in a letter to Ladoux and gave it to Denvignes to take with him when he returned to Paris. French military intelligence would later deny any knowledge of Denvignes or the letter.

On January 2, 1917, having received neither instructions nor payment from Ladoux, Mata Hari returned to Paris. Again, if she actually were a double agent, this would have been a foolish, even suicidal, move. It is far more likely she was simply in over her head and didn't yet realize it. She went to Ladoux, who denied any knowledge of...well, anything. She spent a few days in the company of her old friend Jules Cambon. Vadim came to visit her in Paris, but had disturbing news. His commanding officer had read him a warning from the Russian Embassy in Paris, telling him to steer clear of Mata Hari. Vadim demanded an explanation. She told him she had none to give.

Mata Hari spent six weeks in Paris, probably wondering what the hell was going on. Again, if she really was the dangerous spy she would be made out to be, it's hard to understand why it would take six weeks to arrest her, but the day came at last when they did. She was imprisoned in a rat-infested cell and interrogated over a period of months by an officer named Pierre Bouchardon, who himself declared that "[f]rom the very first interview, I had the intuition that she was a person in the pay of our enemies...I had but one thought—to unmask her." Mata Hari, the self-invented woman who had lived a convoluted life, was questioned in detail about her travels and her lovers. She often made mistakes or contradicted herself, which would not be surprising from anyone in her position, but all this was taken as evidence of deception. Bouchardon ended his investigation with the same attitude he'd held at the beginning, reporting to the military court that "[w]ithout scruples, accustomed to make use of men, she is the type of woman who is born to be a spy," which seems to me to translate to "I don't know what she did, but I'm sure she's guilty."

Her many liaisons with men of many nations were used as evidence against her. I've already noted some of them. Every time she met with an Allied government or military man, she was presumed to be fishing for secrets. Every time she talked to a German, it was to pass on the information she had garnered. Every time a man gave her money, it was a German payment.

Her attorney, still Édouard Clunet, and still one of her former lovers, was a respected French lawyer, although his understanding of military courts was limited and it shows. He was denied access to most of the interviews and evidence and denied the opportunity to cross examine. His defense relied on calling some of Mata Hari's lovers, like Jules Cambon, to have them testify that she had never asked them any questions of a sensitive or military nature.

The accusation was made that on her December 1915 return trip to the Netherlands, Mata Hari had twice made plans to travel on a certain ship and twice changed them, and in both cases the ship in question was torpedoed by a U-boat and sunk, the implication being that German intelligence had warned her off certain ships, knowing they were to be attacked. Mata Hari denied making any such changes, and the story is absurd on its face. As I've already told you, she'd have had to travel to Vigo or Lisbon to catch a ship bound for the Netherlands, and that was a 48-hour train trip. U-boats do not choose their prey days in advance after consultation with the German admiralty. They patrol in radio silence and attack targets of opportunity. Surely the military officers involved in this case understood that.

Even more ludicrous is the claim made at her trial and often repeated afterward that her espionage cost 50,000 lives, including hundreds of women and children on torpedoed ships. To even consider this claim, you'd have to know what information it was that she passed on to the Germans that was so valuable. In fact, no one, in 1917 or in the century since, has identified a single piece of classified information Mata Hari is alleged to have given to the Germans.

The only real evidence, as opposed to dark suggestions, was some German intelligence messages that Captain Ladoux claimed were intercepted between Madrid and Berlin. These cables were allegedly intercepted in December 1916, when Mata Hari was in Madrid, and refer to the activities of an agent only designated "H-21," although described in so much detail that she could only be Mata Hari. Still, these messages, allegedly intercepted in December, were not introduced into the investigation until the following April, and only in decoded and translated form. No one aside from Ladoux ever saw the original messages, and in our time it is widely assumed they were forgeries. Ladoux, by the way, was arrested for espionage himself, not long after the arrest of Mata Hari. He was eventually exonerated, but still, it gives you an idea of the paranoia of the times. This was when the French Army was mutinying and the U-boat losses were mounting; the future seemed uncertain.

When Mata Hari was put on trial, the military court was presented with a six-inch high stack of documents assembled by Captain Bouchardon. The trial lasted a day and a half. The verdict was

guilty. The sentence was death. Clunet, the attorney, wept when the sentence was pronounced. Mata Hari herself called out, “C’est impossible! C’est impossible!”

She appealed the decision; her appeal was denied. She petitioned the President of France; he denied her request for clemency. She appealed to the Dutch Foreign Office for help and they petitioned the French government for clemency. They were also refused.

Mata Hari was executed by a firing squad on Monday, October 15, 1917, just after dawn. The Eye of the Day. No one claimed her remains; they were donated to a hospital in Paris for dissection, in the interest of science. Her ex-husband petitioned the French government for her estate, on behalf of their daughter. The French government informed him that her worldly goods had been seized by the government as compensation.

The case of Mata Hari is strongly reminiscent of that of Alfred Dreyfus, whom you may recall from episode 8, another case of French military intelligence run amok, fabricating evidence, refusing to see what was in plain sight. The difference is that while history has vindicated Dreyfus, who is now rightly seen as the innocent victim of an ugly anti-Semitism, history has been more reluctant to vindicate Mata Hari, despite the lack of evidence, and even despite the German government’s post-war denials. She was as surely convicted for her fabricated life story, her loose morals, and her simply being a smart and independent woman unapologetically living her own life her own way as Alfred Dreyfus was for being Jewish.

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you all for listening. I’d like to thank Mikio for making a donation, and thank you Charles for becoming a patron of the podcast. There’s no mystery over how to become a donor or a patron; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. You’ll be glad you did.

I’m going to claim another weekend off next week, because it’s Easter in Western Christianity, but I hope you’ll join me in two weeks’ time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, when we return to China. We haven’t looked in on the Chinese for a while, so let’s get caught up on how the Great War is affecting the Middle Kingdom. Like a River Flowing on, in two weeks’ time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. There’s a phrase—*femme fatale*. In French it means “the deadly woman,” and the term represents an archetype, that of the dangerous woman with a hidden agenda who seduces a man who by all rights ought to be stronger than her and leads him to his destruction.

Storytellers—male storytellers—have been telling this story for as long as there have been stories. Consider Morgan le Fay. Consider Delilah. For that matter consider Eve.

There are those who suggest that during the Romantic period of the late 19th century, the *femme fatale* archetype was particularly popular. There is, for instance, Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen*.

It's one of the most famous operas of all time. I used music from that opera for this episode, and I bet that even if you are no opera buff, you likely recognize the opera and perhaps bits of the music. And of course, there's Richard Strauss's opera *Salomé*, the one Mata Hari wanted so badly to perform.

It's ironic, in view of that ambition, that the story of Mata Hari herself has become indistinguishable from the archetype. This is only one anecdote, but let me share it with you. When I researched this episode, I searched for books on Mata Hari in my local library. I found one biography from the 1930s that accepts her guilt, three modern biographies that dispute it...and four novels "based on" the life of Mata Hari. She has also inspired movies, plays, musicals, a ballet, and an opera. It would be hard to summarize the cultural impact of her story. Virtually every story told of a seductive woman spy for the past century owes something to Mata Hari.

I can't help feeling that this is very sad. I have nothing against spy stories, mind you, but I do mind when romantic fiction eclipses fact. Even now, a century later, we can't seem to let go of the image of Mata Hari, superspy, and simply admire the real woman for her feisty independence and acknowledge her victimization at the hands of a corrupt military.

[music: Closing War Theme]