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Seduction of the imagination

By Maria Tumarkin

The femme fatale Mata Hari's real crime might have been to be the embodiment of that fiction, the erotic spy.

WHEN IN 1992 DAME Stella Rimington became the first female and the first publicly named chief of Britain's Security Service MI5, the tabloids struggled with the headlines. Rimington seemed as unexotic as they come, an affront to all the popular fantasies of female spies who made it to the top. She was middle-class, middle-aged, short-haired and had one other fatal weakness - she was married with two children. The media eventually dubbed Rimington the Housewife Superspy, an embarrassingly tame headline for the story that should have been a coup de grace for Britain's Fleet Street. You can feel for the tabloids. They were dying for something very different - more danger, more sex, more James Bond and, of course, much more Mata Hari.

A British diplomatic wife, whose first job was an assistant archivist in the Worcestershire County Records Office, is, of course, no match for an exotic dancer and A-list courtesan executed by the French for spying in 1917. In the pantheon of female spies, Mata Hari reigns supreme. She is the flesh-and-blood prototype of all those James Bond women - femme fatales with semi-automatic rifles in their pea-sized French knickers. Just like them, Mata Hari was a seductress in a league of her own - the kind that only a saint or a fool could resist. However, unlike them and Dame Stella, there has never been any conclusive proof that Mata Hari was actually a spy.

This is not the only little-known fact about the 20th century's most celebrated wicked woman. The name Mata Hari ("the eye of dawn", in Malay), just like the enigmatic Oriental persona that came with it, was pure inspired invention. Mata Hari's real name was Margaretha Geertruida Zelle. Despite the claims of a sacred Hindu lineage, Mata Hari was born in Holland in 1876 to a Dutch father and a mother with Javanese roots.

When she was 18 she married a 38-year-old Dutch military officer, Rudolph MacLeod, and followed him to Java. The couple had two kids. One, a boy, was poisoned by the native nanny, allegedly in response to the master of the house brutalising her some time earlier. Rudolph was abusive not only to his servants. A heavy-drinking philanderer, he regularly mistreated his young wife. Perhaps most women of her generation would have resigned themselves to a life with an unfaithful and cruel man. Margaretha did not. She ran away in 1904 and metamorphosed into Mata Hari.
It did not take long for the fabricated Oriental persona to become more real than the real thing. More than a decade later, at Mata Hari's trial in Paris, the prosecutors familiar with her true identity still spoke of the woman in front of them as an Asiatic savage, a person utterly alien, in her culture, skin and mentality, to European latitudes. It was a coup for Mata Hari, the self-made performer and con artist.

The act, which made Mata Hari famous all across Europe, was what you would call erotic exotica - sex cross-fertilised with mystique, an early 20th-century multicultural striptease. She came on stage wearing veils and a body stocking.

As a barely clad Javanese maid, she danced to a revered Hindu idol with all the suggestion of passionate unconditional surrender. It was all too easy for men in the audience to feel they could be gods too, if only they could get close to that uncommonly tall body taunting them from under the see-through veils.

Today her act could barely make it in a provincial drag club, but in the beginning of the 20th century it clearly hit a nerve. The fabricated Oriental roots lent a priceless authenticity to Mata Hari's brand of dancing, taking her well beyond dingy underground clubs and private lesbian parties to considerable venues in Monte Carlo, Paris and Milan, including the coveted La Scala. Her Orientalism would also make her such an obvious, inviting target for espionage accusations at the outbreak of the First World War. After all, here was a woman, a sore in the public's eye, predatory, depraved and obscenely foreign.

As a celebrity courtesan, Mata Hari had a long list of illustrious and well-paying patrons, mainly in uniform. A rare man could resist her famed powers of seduction. Mata Hari's decadent way of life, tolerated, even admired before the war, became a source of deep irritation and unease once the hardships, death and fear spread through the European countries.

IN PARTICULAR, THE WAY Mata Hari was known to use sex as a weapon seemed to make the general public downright queasy. After all, it exposed the fatal weaknesses of army and government officials - the men supposedly in charge of running and defending their countries. In an attempt to shift the blame from the men, the public imbued international courtesans such as Mata Hari with almost supernatural powers of seduction and manipulation.

Although she was only one of an estimated 10 women and 300 men executed by the French for espionage, Mata Hari alone is remembered and tirelessly mythologised to this day. She alone stands as a universally recognisable symbol of erotic espionage. In the words of Julie Wheelwright, the author of The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage, Mata Hari remains the 20th century's "most important icon of female betrayal". Her alleged espionage activities were linked to nothing less than the deaths of at least 50,000 French soldiers.
Yet the charges of espionage on which Mata Hari was convicted and executed are disputed to this day. Her prosecutor, Andre Mornet, would later admit that during her 1917 trial, "There was not enough evidence to whip a cat."

How could this have happened to a woman who, by all accounts, seems to have been engaged in nothing more unpatriotic than reckless sleeping with military men on both sides of the conflict? During the trial, Mata Hari was repeatedly questioned about the fact that her lovers were exclusively high-ranking military men. Such a clear preference at a time of war did not seem at all plausible for a courtesan not interested in military secrets. "To me," she replied, "the officer forms a race apart . . . I never noticed whether they were German, Italian or French."

These days it is hard to surprise anyone with revelations of false espionage accusations and show trials. After all, as Donald Rumsfeld had recently reminded the international community, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In peacetime and in war each country needs its spies just as much, if not more than its heroes. Spies caught and, if possible, executed, provide a priceless release for the weary and frightened public - they re-energise the home front, give an extra boost of self-righteous patriotism to the war effort and, of course, they reassure the public of the tireless vigilance and ingenuity of its government.

The obsession with the femme fatale as the potent agent of war seems a pleasant distraction from today's grave fears inspired by global terrorism. A beautiful woman who strangles as she straddles seems a downright luxurious way of conducting warfare.

Of course, less than a decade ago, a story particularly popular in Chinese tabloids suggested that Monica Lewinsky was sent to Washington as a child in the 1970s by the KGB on an admittedly long-term mission to sexually ensnare the US president and, thus, to shift dramatically the balance of the Cold War. Our Monica, the story revealed, was a latter-day Mata Hari, a seductress with an ability to change the course of history.

We laugh, but there is nostalgia in our laughter. We long for simpler times when Monica could be just that - a femme fatale with the mission to whip Bill Clinton into a decadent frenzy. It is hard to give up a fantasy, yet we need to face up to the sad fact that erotic espionage is itself by and large a fiction. Just ask Dame Stella Rimington. Recently declassified, Britain's MI5 files from the times of World War II tell us that painstakingly engineered honey traps are by and large the product of the public's imagination.

IN THE MI5 FILES, MAXWELL Knight, the real-life prototype for the spy chief M in the James Bond series, cautions against the use of "Mata Hari methods" by female agents.

Knight ran MI5 in World War II and was involved in recruiting agents to infiltrate Nazi spy rings. He is adamant that the oversexed female spy is every
intelligence officer's worst nightmare. In the intelligence game, Knight says, sex is a short-term, volatile and largely ineffectual weapon.

Mata Hari was sentenced on July 25, 1917, and executed a few months later on October 15. She was immaculately dressed for the occasion - in stockings, a pearl-grey frock, a hat with a veil and a pair of gloves. She refused a blindfold and stood up straight rather than having her hands tied to the firing post. The sergeant major helping her was deeply moved by the convicted woman's courage. "This lady knows how to die," he noted, still stunned, after the execution.

As the 12 soldiers raised their rifles, Mata Hari blew them a kiss before collapsing on the ground. Whether her last actions revealed profound courage, insanity or the depth of her self-delusion as a performer, we shall never know.

Perhaps after all she had endured, Mata Hari still believed men in uniform could do her no harm.

Mata Hari wanted to be bigger than life and she certainly was just that, both during her life and after her death. And there is much that she and Dame Stella have in common. Both are mothers. Both have courage and dignity to spread around. Both, one literally and one figuratively, refused the blindfold. On retirement, Dame Stella went against the entire intelligence community and published an autobiography. She faced both her former colleagues and a media intent on ripping her to shreds, while blowing them a kiss.

In their own way, both Rimington and Mata Hari defied completely our preconceived notion and enduring fantasy of women spies. And at the end of the day, neither one was Mata Hari.

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