

## **Mata Hari vs the State: Inside the Androcentric Intelligence**

**Nasreen Sultana<sup>1</sup>, Rayna Mukherjee<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Post Graduation, Department of English, Loreto College

<sup>2</sup>Post Graduation, Department of English, Loreto College

### **Abstract**

An abused wife, a beaten mother, the most wanted courtesan of her time and then a woman on death row.

Mata Hari, born as Margaretha Geertruida Zella, lived a life that unfolded like a succession of identities, each so different from the other, meticulously framed and ultimately destroyed by politics and narratives by people in power.

This presentation examines how the presence of an erotic dancer became the battleground where gender, surveillance and nationalist anxiety converged. Drawing from intelligence files, wartime journalism and literature about her, the gunshot on Mata Hari pans out as an engineered downfall through androcentric state mechanisms that interpreted her practice of autonomy and liberty as a threat. Her erotic self-fashioning, transnational movements and refusal to succumb to patriarchal moral conventions made her susceptible and an ideal vessel for wartime paranoia.

Intelligence institutions vilified her; her gender was her evidence; newspapers amplified orientalist fantasies to orchestrate public fear and cultural narratives reduced her to myth, denouncing her historical agency. Through layered narratives, this study argues that she didn't just fall prey to

the espionage accusations but was consumed by a larger political system that needed to blame a woman to sanitise itself, doubly victimising her, both in the hands of Germany and France alike. Her story exposes the endured structures of states that rewrite female autocracy into symbols of danger, cracking the shallow walls of masked protection, revealing how gendered suspicion remains central to the performance of national power.

**Keywords:** *Gendered scapegoating, war mechanism, androcentrism*

## **Introduction**

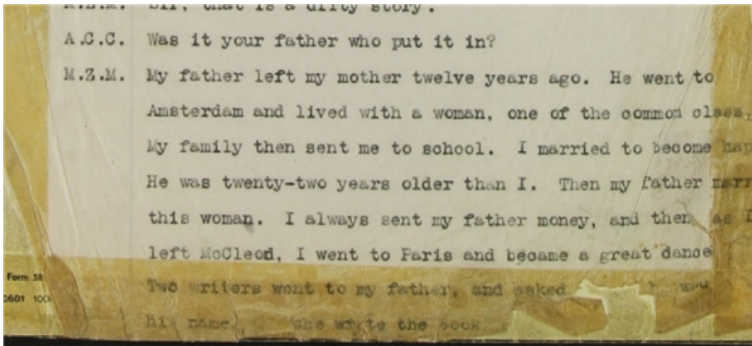
From celebration to conviction, Mata Hari's trial and fate is one of the most prominent cases of political and gender scapegoating discussed in the public domain. She became the symbol onto whom two collapsing nation-states projected their fears and failures. Despite the fascination with Mata Hari in popular culture and academia, existing works and research have remained largely confined to three dominant trajectories:

- 1) construct of espionage
- 2) biographical reassessment of her guilt
- 3) feminist reception that frames her as a misunderstood woman.

While these approaches have been a way to challenge the myth of the femme fatale, they often fall short of exploring the structural logic that entails her vilification. In particular, there remains a significant void in scholarship that places Mata Hari's prosecution within the framework of androcentric intelligence culture, where state security, masculinity, and moral discipline converged to a national crisis.

While historians and popular commentators increasingly acknowledge the absence of concrete evidence against Mata Hari, academic discussions have yet to fully account for why her execution was politically necessary. Existing literature often isolates her case as an anomaly or gendered moral tragedy, rather than as a symptom of a broader structural wartime intelligence crisis within the two nations during the time of her acquittal. There is a notable gap in examining how gender, affect, and state insecurity operate together to produce scapegoats during periods of military failure.

### **Early life and rise of Mata Hari:**



*Source : The National Archives ( under the Crown copyright) <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/filesonfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcl eod-margaretha-geertruida-marguerite-gertrude-kv-2-1.pdf> page 70*

Her father's gambling addiction caused her small family to crumble, which landed her in the hands of a relative who took her responsibility in her teens. As a student, she was a victim of forced sexual advances from her headmaster that tainted her stance about education. A few more years added and an 18-year-old Margeretha answered a newspaper advertisement to be married to 38-year-old Dutch colonial army captain, Rudolph MacLeod, who promised happiness but Mata Hari lived in the misery of an abusive wedlock and the tragic loss of several of her children. The only surviving

child was her daughter, Louise Jeanne, whom she had to give up to Captain MacLeod when she escaped the marriage.

Margaretta ran to Paris with an empty hand, no financial security, no clothes other than what she was wearing. It was a survival instinct that pushed her to run away from Captain MacLeod's humiliation, and it was the same instinct that gave birth to the most celebrated entertainer of the time, Mata Hari.



*Margaretta Zelle as Mata <https://pin.it/1P7x9bT7V> (Accessed 23Nov.2025)*

In escaping the domestic confinement, Mata Hari embodied what Carole Pateman terms a challenge to the “sexual contract”. The fluidity in her movements pushed her outside the expectations of respectable femininity, and added to that was the fact that she enacted a marginalized and orientalized model of sensual womanhood that seduced elite men. She had been conducting Pan-European shows that made her visible, mobile, independent and sexually aware, all of which are traits that placed her on the margins of female obedience and national loyalty.

### **National anxiety and the upcoming upheaval:**

Unfortunately, the rise of World War 1, a period of national anxiety and Mata Hari's success coincided. France and Germany were losing manpower to the war alongside their moral, reputation and political authority. National intel suffered from discrepancies, mismanagement and internal rivalry. In such circumstances as Sara Ahmed theorises in her research "theory of Affective economies", emotions like fear, suspicion and xenophobia circulated rapidly, attaching themselves to bodies already coded as foreign and deviant (Ahmed, S. (2004). *Affective Economies*. *Social Text* 22(2), 117-139. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>) . Mata Hari was an ideal victim of such a concept - sensual, eroticised and without one fixed country to root herself to.

This is where the "scapegoating" mechanism emerged. What she had become was the perfect formulation of sacrificed victim as defined by Ren Girard, the state redirected its own incompetence onto a single figure. Article by Hugh Schofield on BBC News, the case revisited on 16th October 2001, he cites historian and scholar of wartime trials Leon Schirmann,

"Mata Hari was not made to be a spy. They used her as part of an anti-German propaganda campaign. She was simply a woman who liked to get the most for life, and she didn't realise that with the war everything changed ".- (Mata Hari was framed, BBC News, October 16, 2001)

On his own research, Schirmann discovered two very prominent discrepancies in the archives:

- 1) First German Military attaché Major Kelle deliberately handed Margaretha to the French since he was aware that his telegram, the infamous H-21 telegram, was intercepted by the French, conveniently almost as soon as it arrived, given the

ironic slow process of Information and the lack of technology of the era.

2) Second, Mr Schirmann stated that they accused Mata Hari of fabricating some of her testimonies, even though they were aware it was true. The officials had testified under a false oath.

First he claims he can show that the German military attache - Major Kelle - deliberately delivered Mata Hari to the French.

He knew that his telegram would be intercepted by the French, so he filled it with incriminating information, implying that she was an extremely valuable German source - even though intelligence reports from Berlin showed she was almost useless.

Clipping of an Article called "Mata Hari was framed" published in BBC on October 16, 2001. This segment discusses the claims of Historian Leon Schirmann.

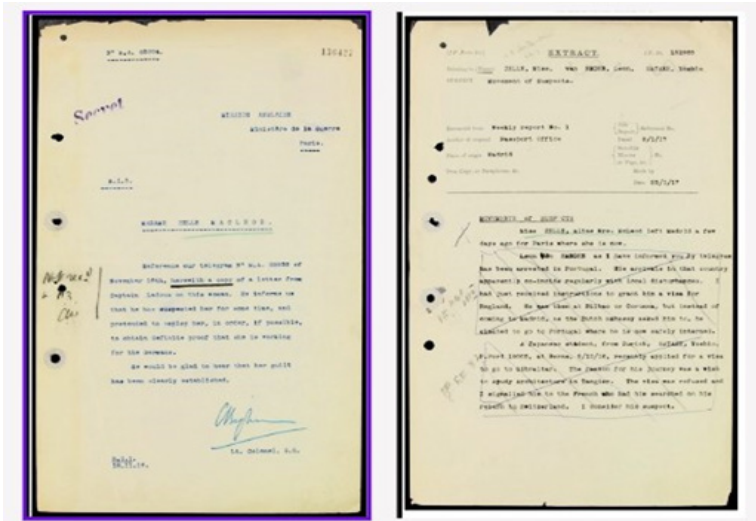
(reported by: Hugh Schofield)

What essentially stood to be the problem was the sexual fluidity and promiscuity of the officials and her irresistible charm of pulling people in, which resulted in physical intimacy, multiple of them, which could be a space for Margaretha to use the vulnerability and extract information if she wanted to. It was the loose resolve and the lack of control on the part of the officials that made it an important agenda for both the French and German States to remove her and also get up, not because there was solid evidence, but because her freedom would cost both the Nations' safety if at all she did have information.

The underlying political theatre can be categorised as group masculine narcissism. World War 1 had shattered the masculine ideals that the nation depended on - strength, rationality, invincibility and strategic mastery. The humiliation from the French war and military blunders produced a crisis in the “national masculine ego”. To preserve the illusion of disciplined masculine order, a female needed to absorb the failure. Mata Hari, already ostracised by liberal sexuality and foreignness, became the perfect vessel for this projection for both the patriarchy and the state agendas. In 1917, her trial exemplified gender criminalisation. The French media described her as the seductress whose body was a weapon, a narrative that weaponised morality against her. CIA (<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000100120015-5.pdf>) and MI5

(<https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/files/onfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcleod-margaretha-geertruida-marguerite-gertrude-kv-2-1.pdf>) later reviewed archival documents and concluded that neither of the countries had evidence against her to prove her guilty of what she was being accused of. She was executed not because she was a dangerous agent but because she was symbolically useful to keep the flags of masculinity held high, safeguarding their own secrets and narratives.

## Declassified Intelligence Files and the Absence of Substantive Evidence



Original files, mentioning assumptions and optimism to be proved true <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/filesonfilm/mata-hari-alias-mcleod-margaretha-ge-ertruida-marguerite-gertrude-ko-2-1.pdf> page 43 & 14.

The declassified intelligence files concerning Mata Hari, particularly British and French counterintelligence correspondence, are frequently invoked as retrospective “proof” of her espionage. However, a close reading of these documents reveals not confirmation of guilt, but rather the persistent failure of intelligence agencies to produce substantiated evidence, coupled with an increasing determination to justify their suspicions. These files do not document espionage activities in any verifiable sense; instead, they expose a pattern of conjecture, surveillance, and narrative persistence that substitutes suspicion for proof.

The intelligence memoranda repeatedly frame Mata Hari as a suspect-in-progress rather than as a confirmed agent. Language such as “suspected” and “possibly employed”

dominates the correspondence, underscoring the speculative nature of the accusations. Notably absent are concrete intelligence tags: coded transmissions directly authored by her, corroborated witness testimonies, or material evidence of information transfer that could withstand juridical scrutiny. Rather than resolving uncertainty, the files reveal an intelligence apparatus trapped in circular reasoning—where suspicion itself becomes the justification for continued investigation.

What is particularly striking is that these documents often acknowledge the lack of definitive proof while simultaneously recommending intensified surveillance and interrogation. This contradiction exposes a critical flaw in wartime intelligence logic: the transformation of uncertainty into incrimination. Mata Hari was not pursued because evidence accumulated against her; she was pursued because the intelligence community had already invested symbolic capital in her guilt. To abandon the accusation would have required acknowledging the systemic failures of intelligence coordination during World War I—a concession the state was unwilling to make amid military losses and declining public morale.

The persistence of surveillance despite evidentiary insufficiency reflects what can be termed institutional confirmation bias. Once Mata Hari was classified as a potential threat, every aspect of her life—her mobility, sexuality, foreign contacts, and financial instability—was reinterpreted through a lens of suspicion. Neutral actions became coded as suspicious; intimacy accounted in intelligence; performance labelled as deception. The files show that rather than testing hypotheses against evidence, intelligence officials repeatedly adjusted interpretations to sustain the original assumption of guilt.

Moreover, the declassified materials reveal a notable preoccupation with her character rather than her actions. Reports linger on her lifestyle, relationships, and perceived moral laxity, reinforcing the argument that her prosecution was driven less by espionage than by gendered anxieties. The intelligence discourse pathologises her sexuality as a national risk, suggesting that her access to male officers constituted a form of espionage in itself. This reflects an androcentric intelligence culture in which male indiscretion is rendered invisible, while female sexuality is criminalised as inherently manipulative.

Equally revealing is the way intelligence agencies appear to pressure Mata Hari into self-incrimination. Interrogation records and intelligence notes suggest that officials repeatedly confronted her with allegations framed as facts, despite their own awareness of evidentiary gaps. This tactic, persistently demanding confirmation of an already assumed guilt, illustrates how the intelligence process became performative rather than investigative. The objective was no longer to determine whether Mata Hari was guilty, but to extract a narrative that would legitimise the state's prior accusations.

This dynamic transforms the declassified files into evidence not of espionage, but of epistemic coercion. Mata Hari was placed in an impossible position: expected to disprove allegations that were never concretely articulated, while being denied access to the very information needed to refute them. Her continued interrogation, despite the absence of new findings, suggests that the intelligence community was attempting to produce guilt rather than discover it.

Crucially, the files also demonstrate that intelligence authorities were aware of the fragility of their case. References to intercepted telegrams – most notably the H-21

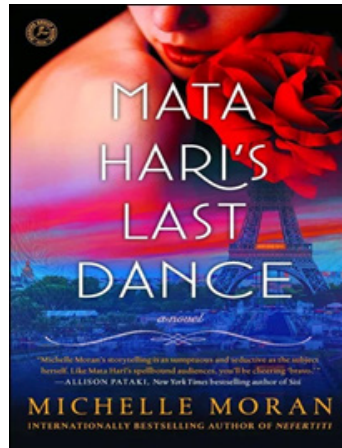
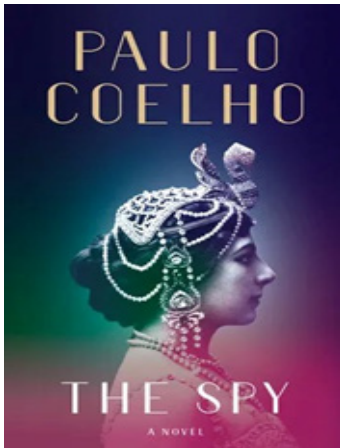
transmission — are presented without corroboration, and later archival analysis has shown that these messages were either misinterpreted or deliberately manipulated. That officials proceeded regardless underscores the political utility of Mata Hari's prosecution. Her execution provided narrative closure, offering the public a tangible enemy at a moment when the real causes of military failure were diffuse, structural, and deeply embarrassing.

Thus, the declassified intelligence files do not vindicate the state's actions; they indict them. They reveal an intelligence regime more invested in preserving masculine authority and institutional credibility than in adhering to evidentiary rigour. Mata Hari was not relentlessly pursued because she was proven dangerous; she was pursued because her existence — mobile, autonomous, sexually nonconforming — embodied a threat to an intelligence system predicated on control, secrecy, and masculine discipline.

In this light, the files stand as archival proof of absence masquerading as certainty. They document not espionage, but the gradual solidification of a myth — one that transformed suspicion into fact through repetition, authority, and ultimately, execution. Mata Hari's guilt was not discovered in the archives; it was manufactured within them.

Executed by a French firing squad in 1917, assumptions of espionage deemed as final with no solid evidence ever backing the claims, her legacy has been solidified in the public's imagination as the archetypal femme fatale — an alluring courtesan who bartered military secrets for riches and romance. This viewpoint, however, is a carefully constructed narrative, which historians largely agree was politically motivated to portray her as a scapegoat for the French Army's catastrophic military failures during World War I.

## Literary narratives



*Cover pages of "The Spy" by Paulo Coelho and "Mata Hari's Last Dance" by Michelle Moran*

The persistent fascination with this persona is apparent in the multitude of her fictional 'afterlives.' This analysis will conduct a comparative examination of two modern historical fiction novels: Paulo Coelho's *The Spy* (2016) and Michelle Moran's *Mata Hari's Last Dance* (2016). By exploring their unique narrative frameworks, philosophical aims, and character representations, this section of the paper will clarify how each text interacts with, contests, or reinforces the foundational myth. The central thesis is that the disparity in their representations arises from the authors' selected emphasis: Coelho highlights the ideological symbol of the liberated woman, while Moran focuses on the personal tragedy of Margaretha Zelle, with both ultimately supporting the assertion that her conviction was a profound injustice rooted in the political necessity to vilify an unconventional woman.

The most notable differences between *The Spy* and *Mata Hari's Last Dance* stem from the author's decision regarding narrative voice and the resulting portrayal of Mata Hari.

Coelho's work is presented as an extensive, fictional final letter from Margaretha to her lawyer, Édouard Clunet, penned during her time in prison. This epistolary approach prioritizes her internal, philosophical journey over adherence to historical accuracy.

**Ideological Focus:** Coelho utilizes Mata Hari as a conduit for his distinctive philosophical reflections on fate, bravery, and freedom. The primary crime, as she articulates, is not treason:

"The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men."

This quotation encapsulates Coelho's thesis: Mata Hari is a martyr for women's liberation, a "precursor of the second wave of feminism" (Naeem & Ali, 2024). Her execution serves as a punishment for her defiance against the patriarchal societal structure: "You are born, go to school, and attend university in search of a husband... You get married - even if he is the worst man in the world" (Coelho, *The Spy*). By illustrating her choice of an alternative path, Coelho characterizes her as an unyielding hero.

By emphasizing her final reflections, the novel often sacrifices the detailed historical context of her struggle. Critics have remarked that Coelho's portrayal makes her seem "shallow and stupid" and "downplay[s] the complicated reality of a woman for whom survival came from rage at how she was downtrodden" (Penslips Magazine, 2019). The Mata Hari depicted in *The Spy* is a self-assured libertine who rarely dwells on her past traumas, thus simplifying the complex,

driven woman into a refined, two-dimensional icon of defiance.

Moran's literary work employs a more standard historical fiction technique, utilizing a third-person perspective that chronicles Margaretha's life from her early years in the Netherlands to her sorrowful conclusion. This format enriches the narrative backdrop and allows for a more intricate analysis of her motivations.

Moran's primary distinction lies in her unwavering attention to the economic and emotional turmoil that forged Mata Hari. The story illustrates the sexual abuse she faced, her disastrous and abusive marriage to Rudolf MacLeod, the devastating loss of her son, and the heart-wrenching decision to give up custody of her daughter, Non, due to her financial constraints. This shifts the narrative of a greedy courtesan into a poignant account of a woman battling for survival.

Moran thoroughly investigates the burden of self-creation. Mata Hari is not inherently free but is perpetually performing a role to survive. The dance and opulent lifestyle are portrayed as a fragile disguise over deep-seated loneliness and financial worry. Moran's Margaretha is depicted as constantly calculating yet profoundly naive about the political perils of her lifestyle, suggesting that her greatest failing was not treasonous intent but rather a reckless indifference and naïveté in a time of conflict. This subtle representation of her self-deception as a tragic flaw amplifies the poignancy of her execution, emphasizing the argument that she was a victim of circumstance, as one reviewer noted, questioning "whether she was truly a spy or whether she merely got caught up in all the glitz and glamour and, ultimately, chose the wrong paramours" (What's Better Than Books, 2016).

Both novels explicitly explore the manipulation of the historical narrative that transformed Margaretha Zelle into the nefarious Mata Hari, yet they attribute the underlying motivations in distinct ways.

The historical backdrop of World War I is crucial. The French military sought both a morale boost and a scapegoat. The reliance on fragmented, coded German telegrams, which were either misinterpreted or intentionally fabricated by French authorities to accuse Mata Hari of being the German spy H-21, highlights the misleading nature of her trial. While both authors put forward the idea that the trial had been politically motivated, neither of them systematically analyse the telegrams – likely because Mata Hari would not have been aware of this information and both novels follow her point of view.

Moran emphasizes the external pressures that rendered Margaretha a target: her ability to traverse borders due to her Dutch neutrality, her ongoing financial struggles, and her history of relationships with high-ranking officers from various nations. In Moran's perspective, her lifestyle rendered her a convenient liability poised to be exploited. Consequently, the trial is portrayed as a judicial farce, focused less on factual evidence and more on the French establishment's need to rid itself of a perceived 'moral menace.

Coelho adopts a more expansive and less historically focused perspective on the conspiracy, presenting it as a fundamental human flaw rather than a necessity arising from wartime conditions. For Coelho, the system's imperative to punish Mata Hari is merely the expected outcome of her refusal to conform.

"Sin was not created by God; it was created by us when we tried to transform what was inevitable into something subjective" (Coelho, *The Spy*).

This statement implies that the so-called “crime” of espionage is simply a subjective designation imposed by a patriarchal society to penalise a woman who dared to establish her own standards of behaviour. From this standpoint, her trial and execution are seen as an inevitable result of her boldness, serving as a cautionary narrative enforced by the system against any woman who seeks self-determination.

Both novels concur on her innocence regarding treason; however, they diverge on the primary reason for her persecution: Moran highlights the specific political and military necessity for a scapegoat, whereas Coelho underscores the enduring ideological drive to suppress the liberated female spirit.

The examination of Paulo Coelho’s *The Spy* in conjunction with Michelle Moran’s *Mata Hari’s Last Dance* highlights two distinct yet complementary efforts to challenge the lasting myth of the seductive traitor.

Coelho utilises the epistolary style to bestow upon Mata Hari the philosophical voice that was denied to her in her lifetime, portraying her as an archetypal representation of female bravery whose true transgression was “being an emancipated and independent woman.” This depiction, while captivating, often reduces the intricate historical and personal layers of her suffering. Conversely, Moran, through a careful historical narrative, anchors Mata Hari in her trauma and despair, effectively portraying her as a tragic scapegoat—a vulnerable woman whose fabricated identity and reckless lifestyle rendered her the perfect victim for a nation eager to obscure its military failures.

Ultimately, both novels engage in a significant act of literary redemption. They shift the emphasis from the sensationalised allegations of supposed espionage (of which she was almost

certainly innocent) to the profound injustice of her conviction. They remind readers that the powerful, enduring myth of the femme fatale was intentionally constructed by a frightened and failing political system to defame an inconvenient, unconventional woman. Mata Hari's most significant "afterlife" is not the myth, but the ongoing literary effort to dismantle it, revealing the narrative of Margaretha Zelle: the independent spirit who paid the ultimate price for her autonomy in a world dominated by men.

## Conclusion

Literature does not merely reflect history; it actively reshapes it, producing counter-archives that challenge or reconfigure dominant narratives. By comparing Paulo Coelho's *The Spy* and Michelle Moran's *Mata Hari's Last Dance*, this paper treats fiction as a critical site where gendered history is contested, reimagined, and ethically reframed.

The comparative approach allows for an analysis of how different narrative strategies—epistolary confession versus realist biography—generate divergent ethical and political interpretations of the same historical figure. Coelho's philosophical abstraction transforms Mata Hari into an ideological symbol of liberated womanhood, while Moran's materialist realism foregrounds economic precarity, trauma, and survival. Reading these texts together reveals not only contrasting literary aesthetics but competing feminist interventions: one that mythologises resistance, and another that insists on the lived cost of autonomy under patriarchy.

The femme fatale as state myth is central to this analysis. Rather than understanding the femme fatale as a timeless archetype, this paper conceptualises her as a state-produced narrative used to discipline non-conforming women. In Mata Hari's case, the femme fatale myth transformed a woman's

survival strategies into evidence of treason, recoding sexuality as sabotage and desire as deception. This myth allowed the state to collapse complex geopolitical failure into a morally legible story of female betrayal.

Taken together, these frameworks enable a reading of Mata Hari's life, trial, and literary afterlives as part of a broader political grammar in which women's bodies are mobilised to stabilize masculine authority during moments of crisis. By integrating feminist historiography, gender and security studies, and comparative literary analysis, this paper demonstrates that Mata Hari was not executed for what she did, but for what she represented: the intolerable visibility of female autonomy within an androcentric system struggling to preserve its legitimacy.

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