

## THE LADY WAS A SPY: WOMEN IN THE SECRET WORLD OF INTELLIGENCE AND ESPIONAGE FROM WORLD WAR 1 TO THE PRESENT

If you should ask about women spies in history, most people would be stumped. A few still might say, with a quizzical look: Mata Hari? These few might have some vague sense, a slight remembrance of hearing her name. Well, that is a good place to begin a look at women spies, because the name Mata Hari was once synonymous for the evil spy from World War I down to the present. It's also a good place to begin, for, like her invented name, practically everything about Mata Hari's story is untrue, including whether she was ever a spy. Nevertheless, she was blamed by the French Government for causing the death of 50,000 soldiers – a number picked out of a hat. Her pursuers called her a “woman of the world,” another synonym, this time for a seductress without morals. What we can learn from works about Mata Hari, however, is both the context and the confusion of all spy “history.”

Thus, for example, the first woman history student to take a degree at Oxford, Gertrude Bell, was also called a spy, with somewhat more accuracy, even though she never seduced generals, blew up railroads, gave away military plans, or wrote in invisible ink. What she did was master Middle Eastern languages, travel hitherto unknown roads, negotiate with Arab leaders – and prove to be more important than Lawrence of Arabia in setting the boundaries of the post-Ottoman Empire states.

There are movies about both Mata Hari and Gertrude Bell. Garbo is always worth seeing, while Nicole Kidman is set against beautiful desert scenes. History plays a walk-on role in both.

When we get to World War II, we could study, for example, Virginia Hall, written about in a recent book; Odette Churchill; and Josephine Baker (Yes, *that* Josephine Baker) among others. These women turned skepticism about female intelligence agents into an asset. An Arab commentator said about Bell, “The only peculiar thing about her was she was a woman!”

During the Cold War there is the “Red Spy Queen,” Elisabeth Bentley, whose revelations helped to touch off McCarthyism, and Stella Rimington, who became the first woman to head MI6. Finally, there is Valerie Plame, who was outed by figures in the George W. Bush administration to get back at a critic of the second Iraq War. These are the major players in “The Lady Was a Spy,” but along the way there are others to talk about.

The course will be a lecture/discussion experience. It will begin by talking about the general field of spy literature, both non-fiction and fiction. Sometimes, indeed, the two overlap. And at least two of the spies turned to fiction themselves, Plame and Rimington.

For readings, here are some suggestions:

Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale: Mata Hari*; Janet Wallace, *Desert Queen*; Sonia Pernel, *A Woman of No Importance*; Larry Loftus, *Code Name Lise*; Jean-Claude Baker, *Josephine Baker, The Hungry Heart*; Valerie Plame Wilson, *Fair Game*; Stella Rimington, *Open Secret*

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**Leader:** Lloyd Gardner is professor emeritus of history at Rutgers University, who has taught three previous courses at Evergreen on intelligence agencies, and the spies who bedevil them.

**Thursdays:** 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks: September 24 through November 12

**Maximum:** unlimited