An Unlikely Spy

Chapter 12
'Britain's Deadly Peril'

In looking at the development of British intelligence before and during the First World War we have only considered espionage, the secret gathering of information about an enemy's activities and intentions, with the focus being on the Western Front. At the same time, the Germans were pursuing their own intelligence operations, with spies operating wherever useful information might be found, including behind the British front lines, in neutral countries and in Britain itself. Royal Navy establishments were an especial target for German spies, and one port in particular was of obvious interest: Folkestone. From early in 1915, the town's harbour became the main

embarkation port for Allied troops heading for the Western Front, with the short sea crossing to Boulogne being the most direct route for the millions of men and women heading to and from the battlefields and back areas. Also of interest to German intelligence was the arrival in the spring of 1915 the Canadian Expeditionary Force, a body over forty thousand men. As will be seen, the Germans also knew of the presence of the Allied intelligence services in Folkestone, and guarding these from the prying eyes of German espionage agents became a high priority. It follows that, as part of British counter-espionage operations, considerable efforts were devoted to thwarting enemy spies in and around Folkestone.

As noted earlier, there was an outbreak of spy mania in Britain well before the start of the First World War, fueled by a crop of spy novels; the phenomenon intensified once the war had started, amid fears that many of the German nationals already in the country were poised to strike, either openly by taking up arms as a prelude to invasion, or covertly, by spying. Scare stories about fifty thousand German waiters, butchers and barbers with access to a secret cache of guns, and to a vast network of enemy spies, took hold throughout Britain. Once war had been declared, the problem became of even greater concern, particularly so in Folkestone where the townsfolk could be forgiven for mistaking as Germans the Flemish-speaking Belgian refugees who flooded into the town. With the town's hotels and restaurants being staffed by a preponderance of German and Austrian waiters, the requirement under the Defence of the Realm Act for Aliens to register with the police led to over a thousand registrations in Folkestone during the first week of the war; despite this, local newspaper reports of the prosecution of those who had failed to register reinforced the belief that enemy spies were lurking around every corner. Spy Mania was highly contagious, even spreading to the House of Lords where claims of the sighting of spies in Folkestone were discussed in November 1915. The 'Spy Peril' debate turned into a heated exchange, during which the government sought to dismiss the reports by stating that the Chief Constable of Folkestone knew nothing about such claims.[i] If this assurance by

Harry Reeve, Folkestone's police chief, provided some reassurance to the townsfolk, it was short-lived. In April 1915, none other than the doyen of spy novels, William Le Queux, paid a visit to the town to give a lecture at the Town Hall, billed as 'The German Spy Peril'. To a packed audience Le Queux warned of the need to remain vigilant; he identified one danger that applied particularly to Folkestone: 'The so-called naturalised German is by far the most dangerous enemy.' (loud applause) 'We must intern ALL Germans to crush the marvelous system of German Espionage.' (loud applause).

The people of Folkestone, stood ready to protect the gateway to the country by maintaining a watch for German spies, and many were the stories of amateur spy hunters chasing their imaginary prey. If their endeavours were usually harmless and sometimes amusing, the suspicion that anyone with a German sounding name was a spy led to some unfortunate incidents.[ii] Charles Constant Wampach was born in Luxembourg and had been a prominent member of Folkestone's civic society, continuing to serve as a Borough councilor during the war. He and his wife owned and ran the Wampach Hotel in Castle Hill Avenue, a prestigious establishment catering for the town's well to do visitors. Soon after war broke out, the hotel was commandeered by the army for troop accommodation and, with their son, Cyril, serving in the Royal Horse Artillery, the Wampach's could not be accused of not doing their bit; but they were. Because of the name, many believed Charles to be German, and few were interested in finding out the truth. As early as October 1914, Wampach's solicitor had to insert a notice in the Folkestone Herald in October 1914 refuting suggestions that his client was a 'German Spy', and pointing out that two of his sons were serving in the British army. Local agitators continued to spread poisonous rumours about Wampach and many other Folkestone businessmen with German-sounding names. The rumourmongers were not limited to the fringes, but included many respected local figures; their claims were legitimised by the likes of William Le Queux, and by the outspoken Horatio Bottomley who published an article in 1915 in his jingoistic John Bull magazine asking why Folkestone should 'put up with this German'. The most

bizarre attempt to discredit Charles Wampach, partly brought about by his own naiveté, occurred in August 1918 when he was prosecuted, unsuccessfully, in Folkestone Police Court for having possession of 'a code adapted for transmitting secretly naval or military information.'[iii] For four years the Wampach's had to endure challenges about their loyalty, but they weathered the storm and reopened the hotel in 1918; their son, Cyril, was killed in action in Mesopotamia in 1918.

The self-appointed spy hunters of Folkestone, busy and diligent as they were, lived in complete ignorance of the very real secret intelligence activities taking place in their town, the full extent of which has only been revealed in recent years, as secret files have gradually been declassified by MI5. Unfortunately, these revelations have not been matched by SIS, but it is possible to pull together strands of evidence from other sources, so that Folkestone's place in the story of First World War espionage and counter-espionage can be examined. Among the sources available, the diary of Major Walter Kirke ranks as one of the most important.

Kirke Diary:

7 November 1914 Concern that forged Belgian passports were being used by German agents to get into UK

24 November 1914 Problem with a wired message appearing in the Daily Mail – info sold either by [Belgian agent] or the telegraph people at Folkestone. Important that staff at all three Allied intelligence offices at Folkestone use Cipher FE

19 December 1914 Cameron informs me that he is to arrange for dispatch of a man with bogus message to test our system.

6 March 1915 German spy 'Johnson' arrested in Boulogne by French on info from England.

William Le Queux's rousing speech in Folkestone, in which he identified naturalised Germans as the most dangerous element, had struck a chord with the public; they worked in the town's high class hotels, as teachers in many of the independent schools, and as self-employed music teachers. Major Kirke's diary note of 7 November

identified a very real problem, that of German spies intermingling with Belgian refugees who were arriving at the town's harbour in their tens of thousands. As well as those travelling on forged Belgian passports, there was the danger that enemy agents could slip into the country along with the many refugees who arrived with no passports or any other form of identification, and who had to be accepted on trust.

The authorities were well aware of the risks that Folkestone could be a point of entry and also a target for enemy surveillance and, to meet these threats, a comprehensive security operation was put in place. However, it was not until late in 1914, when plans were being made for the town's harbour to become the principal embarkation port for troops and others leaving for the front, that the system became fully operational. 'Altogether a quarter of a million refugees crossed to England in every manner of craft from warship to rowing boat, and it became utterly impossible for the authorities at Folkestone and Dover to check identification papers. In fact, very few of the outcasts had passports at all. The German Intelligence branch benefited to the full by this and smuggled in many spies masquerading as sorely stricken Belgians, homeless and penniless human beings. Some of these were subsequently arrested, tried and shot, and their apprehension threw a quite unfair and unfortunate stigma on Belgians generally.'[iv]

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stricken Belgians, homeless and penniless human beings. Some of these were subsequently arrested, tried and shot, and their apprehension threw a quite unfair and unfortunate stigma on Belgians generally.'[v]

Security operations covered both espionage and counter-espionage. The former and the main subject of this book can be summarised as the recruitment and training of agents, the receipt of raw intelligence and its assessment and dissemination to the British and Allied forces. Mansfield Cumming's Secret Service had a small office in the Folkestone, but it was principally Cameron's GHQ army intelligence service, along with the French and Belgian intelligence services, operating from Marine Parade, that undertook this work.

For counter-espionage work, Folkestone assembled a multitude of agencies. The first MI5 officer was posted to Folkestone in September 1914 and worked alongside the civil police, including Folkestone Borough Police, Metropolitan Police officers and Special Branch.[vi] At the port there were Aliens Officers, who were invariably army officers with an intelligence background, together with Customs Officers and transport officers, all of whom were keeping watch on the comings and goings at the busy harbour.

In 1915 the zone around the harbour was declared a Restricted Area, entry to which required a permit. In addition to the civil police there were the Military Police, controlled by the Town Commandant and his staff of Army officers. Finally, though limited in numbers and jurisdiction, there were uniformed Gendarmes from the French and Belgian delegations both of which had consulates in the town. Despite these precautions, there remained many ways into and out of the town, by road, sea and rail, that well trained enemy spies could travel with reasonable ease.

It is generally contended that following the roundup of German spies by the police and MI5 immediately after the outbreak of war, few enemy spies of ability were deployed to Britain. Furthermore, that those who did manage to enter the country were poorly trained and doomed to early detection. This reassuring picture was supported by the arrest, conviction and execution of a number of German spies.

However, it is simply not known how many other spies managed to successfully operate in Britain. There were German spy schools in neutral Holland which produced a constant stream of trained agents who were sent to Britain via the ports of Flushing and Rotterdam. Arthur Claren, a Belgian driver and mechanic was recruited by the Germans in 1915, and then sent to their training school, Kriegsnachrichtenstelle in Antwerp. Under Hauptmann Kiefer, the school concentrated upon training spies to infiltrate Britain and France. There were a further fifty agents in training during Claren's time at the school. Before he could put his training into practice, the Belgian was arrested by the Dutch and gave a detailed account of the school and operations. 'I was brought in an automobile, with closed curtains, to a beautiful and large house with an extensive German staff both in civilian dress and in uniform. I was welcomed by a German lady who spoke French fluently, and a man in civilian clothes who they called Hauptmann.' With a promise that the work was not dangerous and that he would earn a lot of money, Clarens agreed to work for the Germans, He was told that he would be given the addresses of German agents in Folkestone, Calais, London and Roosendaal. Unconvincingly, he claimed that he only agreed to the work with the intention of betraying the German agents to the Allies.[vii]

Among the hundreds of German reservists who gathered at Folkestone harbour during the early days of August 1914, answering the call to return to their homeland to take up arms, was Albert Meyer. He was rounded up with several hundred others and marched off under armed guard, destined to spend the rest of the war in internment camps. Meyer, however, convinced the authorities that he was of Turkish origin, and was released. In fact, he was a German spy and began sending reports to an address in The Hague written in invisible ink, most of which were complete make-believe, Intercepted by censors of the Post Office, the letters led to his arrest, trial and conviction. On 2 December 1915, Meyer was taken from his cell in the Tower for the short march to the rifle range for his appointment with the firing squad. As he broke into a rendition of Tipperary, his

guards tried to quieten him, but his behavior became even more bizarre: ‘He stopped on reaching the miniature rifle range where he was to be shot and cast a raving eye at the chair standing in the middle. Then he burst into a torrent of blasphemous cursing, reviling his Maker and calling down the vengeance of Heaven on those who had deserted him. Struggling fiercely with this stalwart guard, he was forcibly placed in the chair and strapped tightly in. Before the bullets of the firing party could reach him he had torn the bandage from his eyes, and died in a contorted mass, shouting curses at his captors, which were only stilled by the bullets.’

Despite the tight security, German spies continued to enter and leave the country through the port of Folkestone. Anton Kupferle had arrived in England in February 1915 claiming to be an American citizen, and Folkestone was to be his escape route at the end of his mission. Following a tip-off, Scotland Yard detectives shadowed Kupferle after his arrival; he travelled to Dublin and then to London where he took a room in a hotel near Victoria Station, where he was visited by several people, including the German spies, Muller and Hahn. On 18 February, he left his hotel carrying a bulging suitcase, entered Victoria Station, and asked for a ticket to Folkestone and for the times of the cross-channel boats. He was told by the ticket clerk that there were no boats; the service had been suspended that very day due to increased activity by German submarines. Trapped in England by his own navy, Kupferle hoisted his suitcase and returned to his hotel, unaware of the Scotland Yard man who had been following him. The police pounced and, finding in his suitcase details of naval and military secrets written in invisible ink, he was charged with espionage.

Kupferle was locked up in the Tower of London to await his trial. As an American, the trial would be held at the Old Bailey rather than a Military Court. A finding of guilt would still lead to the death sentence, but this would be carried out on the gallows rather than the shooting range at the Tower, where other German spies had met their end.

On the second day of the trial, the Attorney General rose to his feet and informed the judges that Kupferle would not be returning to court: he had taken his own life in Brixton prison during the night. He had used a silk scarf to hang himself in his cell, leaving a note explaining 'I am a soldier with a rank I do not wish to mention. I can say that I have had a fair trial in the United Kingdom, but I am unable longer to stand the strain, and I take the law in my own hands. I have fought many a battle and death is the only savior for me. I would prefer death by shooting, but I do not wish to ascend the scaffold, and I hope the Almighty Architect of this universe will lead me in the unknown land. I am not dying as a spy, but as a soldier.' Even if he had managed to catch the train to Folkestone, and even if the cross-channel boats were still sailing, Kupferle was doomed from the day he set foot on British soil: he had been followed by police officers since his arrival, and he would never have been allowed to step from Folkestone harbour onto a departing ship.

One of the more colourful, though unsavoury, arrivals at Folkestone was music hall juggler Kenneth Rysbach, the son of a naturalised British father. When war broke out he was in Germany and was interned at Ruhleben Camp where he was recruited and trained by German intelligence. His arrival at Folkestone on 27 June 1917 seems to have triggered no alarms, and for the next two months he worked unnoticed both as an entertainer and a spy.

The Post Office Censorship Unit scrutinised millions of letters during the war; sometimes they already knew of certain addresses in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands, used by German intelligence. It was to such an address that the Unit discovered two postal items, each a piece of sheet music, 'On the way to Dublin Town' and 'The Ladder of Love'. Further examination revealed invisible writing between the rows of notes, and the writing included details of a munitions factory in Richmond. Counter-intelligence inquiries led to an address in Brixton, south London and, when the police swooped, they found Rysbach living there with his fiancée, a music-hall trick cyclist. At his trial, Rysbach admitted being the author of the secret text, but had no intention of spying, simply of securing his release

from Ruhleben and then to provide information of no value to his spymaster. The first jury was undecided, but he was convicted at a second trial and sentenced to life in prison; he was released and deported in 1924.

Whilst the Post Office Censorship Unit was credited with intercepting the correspondence of a number of German spies, it was not immune to enemy infiltration. Jules Crawford Silber was a spy working for German Naval Intelligence who claimed to have obtained work as a censor with the unit, where his command of the German language was an asset. After the war he wrote a book about his exploits and successes in providing crucial intelligence to his masters, though doubts have been expressed about some of his claims.[viii] He carried out most of his espionage at the Edinburgh office, though he did try to obtain a transfer to the south coast: 'A branch of the censorship was to be opened at Folkestone at that time to deal with the correspondence between Belgium and Holland, and I asked for a transfer to this office, hoping that I should thus have a better chance of finding out all the details of these traps and other measures taken, for the destruction of the U -boats. Unfortunately I made the mistake of applying directly to Colonel X, instead of through my immediate superior. As this was a breach of regulations, my application was turned down.'[ix]

For some enemy spies, Folkestone was not just a place of transit, but a destination, a target for surveillance. One very reliable and respected Allied agent, Albert Bauschwitz-Meau, who worked in Cameron's Paris office, was convinced that when he arrived at the harbour in 1916 he had been photographed by enemy agents.[x] It might be thought that it was simply an occupational hazard for someone engaged in such work to imagine that he was being watched; understandable when survival depended on an acute awareness of surroundings and anything out of place. In fact, based on declassified MI5 files, it now seems more than likely that Bauschwitz-Meau was being photographed and, although he may not have been compromised, a number of French agents who were photographed in Folkestone were to pay with their lives.

As has been noted, French intelligence services formed part of the tri-partite bureau established on Folkestone's seafront, a short walk from the harbour. The bureau was not only an administration and analysis centre for the allied services, it was also where agents were trained and, sometimes, returned for debriefings or rest and recuperation. Perhaps it was concern at the comings and goings at Marine Parade, and an attempt to keep their agents from the prying eyes of both friend and foe, that the French also ran another intelligence operation in Sandgate Road, well away from the harbour.

Jeanne de Beir was a 40 year old widow, living in Dunkirk and working in the shop at the town's railway station. She witnessed the influx of distressed Belgian refugees and did her best to help them. Then, in June 1915, she was approached and asked if she would 'work for France'. She agreed and within days found herself crossing the Channel to Folkestone. Monsieur Robert of the French secret service provided her with a new passport, a basket containing four pigeons and the following letter:

'On arrival at Folkestone, report yourself to Commandant Wallner at 87, Sandgate Road (enter by the door marked 'British School of Languages') Leave with the Commandant your violet passport which must on no account be carried in Holland. This passport will be returned to you when you return from Folkestone to Dunkirk. You should also leave with him all other papers and objects which you do not wish to carry with you. When you have information which you wish to send, forward it as quickly as possible to the Military Attaché at the Hague indicating anything of urgent importance so that it may be telegraphed. - You should also write to the Attaché if you are in need of money. Return to Folkestone when you have completed your mission but try and arrange for enquiries to be continued in Bruges so that we may be kept informed during your absence. Do not return to Folkestone unless you have really urgent information which must be given to me personally.'[xi]

The reason for the warning to Jeanne not to return to Folkestone if it could be avoided was clearly demonstrated by other events unfolding in the town at this time. Locating their secret intelligence

operation in a building just two steps from the French Consulate might have been a classic case of hiding something in plain sight – if it had worked. The obvious flaw in the plan was fully exploited by the German spy Pierre Rotheudt, aided by a Folkestone dressmaker, Albertine Stanaway.

Albertine was born in 1882 in Angers, France. Bin 1911, by then a skilled dressmaker, she came to England, moving to Folkestone where there was a ready demand for her skills amongst the well-to-do ladies of the town. She met and married Frederick Stanaway, a ship's steward and thereby acquired British citizenship. Her husband joined the Kent Cyclists in September 1914 and was immediately shipped to India. Now living alone at 84 Cheriton Road, Albertine seems to have become friendly and intimate with a number of Belgian soldiers who had arrived in Folkestone along with several thousands of civilian refugees who had fled their country in the face of the German invasion.

In January 1915 Albertine became acquainted with Pierre Rotheudt, a corporal in the Belgian army, freshly arrived in Folkestone, and he lived with her for a few days before returning to his regiment. After being wounded in July, Rotheudt spent a short time in Hospital at La Panne before coming back to Folkestone where he again put up with Stanaway. He also rented a room in Sandgate Road, opposite the French Consulate at number 85, from where he could observe the comings and goings there and also at the French intelligence bureau two doors away.

It was after a number of French agents had been arrested and executed as they returned from Folkestone to German occupied territory that the French took an interest in Rotheudt. He had in fact been under surveillance by the Belgians ever since his first trip to England, and they had tipped off MI5 that they believed him to be a German spy. Unfortunately, insufficient evidence had been available to detain him then; French counter-espionage investigations into the execution of their agents slowly but inexorably led to Rotheudt being identified as the man responsible.

He was then arrested in Folkestone and transferred into French custody. Convicted of espionage by a Court Martial in December 1916, Rotheudt was sentenced to death, though this was later commuted to life imprisonment. The question for MI5 was the extent to which Albertine Stanaway was involved in Rotheudt's treachery. A detailed investigation turned up several incriminating pieces of evidence, including her acting as a post box between Rotheudt and his German spymasters in Holland. She had also received sums of money from the same source to pay for the spy's defence. Interviewed about this evidence, Stanaway gave plausible explanations. The Security Service put the papers in front of the Director of Public Prosecutions, but he decided that there was insufficient evidence to mount a prosecution. Instead the dressmaker from Folkestone, who had been something of a comfort to a number of Belgian soldiers, but who had also been partly responsible for the deaths of several French secret agents, was interned in Aylesbury prison. After her release in 1919, Stanaway moved to Cornwall, later moving to London. She was last heard of living with her husband in Rathbone Place.[xii]

Kirke's diary entry for 6 March 1915 shows that, with the arrest by the French of a German spy, the decision to create a tripartite intelligence bureau in Folkestone was paying dividends, not only in producing material for use by all three armies on the front line, but also with the bonus of sharing counter-espionage information. This co-operation had led to the arrest at Folkestone of a Belgian named Prevost and his two daughters on the strength of an intelligence tip-off from the French. Prevost had been a lock-keeper at Boesinghe and the apparently respectable trio would probably not have been unmasked without this inter-agency co-operation. Whilst being searched they were found in possession of documents establishing that they had been in league with a German agent named Dittmar who was operating behind the Allied lines. The man and his daughters were sent back to Belgium for trial. Their fate is not known.

They were not to know it, but the anxiety, or perhaps excitement, felt by the people of Folkestone that enemy spies were in their midst, having entered the country masquerading as Belgian refugees, was

fully justified. Major Kirke recorded the suspicion that Belgian passports were being used by Germans mingling with the thousands of refugees pouring into the port.

Despite being numerically fewer than men, women spies have always attracted greater interest than their male counterparts; with their ability to induce men to part with secrets with the promise of real or imagined intimacy, stories of their activities are often garnished with titillating details. With the vast numbers of British and Allied officers congregating in Folkestone, many waiting for deployment to the uncertain future of front line duty, a female spy prepared to use her charms was assured of rich pickings, and it is unsurprising that the secret files of MI5 contain this cryptic entry:

'A German woman who posed as a Swiss, went frequently to Folkestone, made friends with officers and left for Germany before proceedings could be begun.'[xiii] How many officers were befriended and what information they surrendered is not disclosed. The unknown woman was to be intercepted if she sought to make any further visits to England: she did not.

Louise Emily Wertheim, known as 'Lizzie', made occasional visits to Folkestone, as well as Margate, Fishguard and the Isle of Man, reporting her findings in code to Dr Brandt in Amsterdam. Wertheim was of German extraction and had teamed up with the German spy, George Breeckow, who plied his trade under the name of Reginald Rowland. They were a slippery pair and were tried together in September 1915; his conviction led to execution by firing squad; Lizzie was sentenced to ten years hard labour. She died in Aylesbury prison in 1920.

Much less specific, but potentially more damaging, was a secret report in December 1914 that Belgian women in Britain were being recruited as German spies and were using Folkestone as a point of entry to France, there to ply their trade. To add to the pressure on the port staff, orders were issued that whilst Belgian women were to still be allowed into the country, they were prohibited from leaving.[xiv] What pressure, if any, was applied to those women to act as spies against Britain? For those who had relatives still living in occupied

Belgium, it is easy to imagine how the Germans would have persuaded them to act as they did.

The challenges for German spies in Britain were similar to Allied agents behind the German lines, especially the ultimate task of transmitting secret information to their headquarters. Though not faced with a lethal high voltage fence, the English Channel created a barrier just as formidable, and British port controls provided a serious impediment to smuggling reports out of the country. Nonetheless, Folkestone was a popular point of arrival and departure for German spies and for British spy hunters, professional and amateur, the Kent coast demanded close surveillance. Although many of the activities of enemy agents were more imagined than real, Folkestone's army of self-appointed spy-catchers pursued them with enthusiastic tenacity, as one of the town's wartime civic leaders, The Reverend John Carlile explained:

'Among a sheaf of spy-stories there are some which should certainly find a permanent record. One of the most dramatic episodes was related from several sources. Information was given to the police of a mysterious light up by the hill. It moved in semi- circles. Some watchers had seen it pass through the air very rapidly ten or twelve times in succession. Others observed it moving slowly, exactly the same way, five or six times. Occasionally it flashed very brightly, but not always in one colour ; at other times it was a clear, steady light. There could be no doubt it was an elaborate code, giving important information. Some were sure that the worker of the signals was intimating the arrival of fresh troops at the Camp.'

'It was undeniable that the flashes were seen upon several occasions just after troops came into Shorncliffe Station. Attempts were made to interpret the code, but these were speculative, and finally it was determined to arrest the person or persons working the signals. Very careful preparations were made; men were selected and armed, as there might be desperate resistance. Anyone who would risk flashing signals across the sea would certainly be armed, and in a critical move might destroy the signals, and take his own life, or the lives of others. Reliable men were set on the trail, and they did not

fail. After watching for several nights in vain, their opportunity came. It was a lovely moonlight night, with just enough mist over the hills to obscure minor objects. Ships were in the Channel held up by the Dover signals; their forms could be seen clearly, though their lights were out. A breeze was blowing up, but only enough to create a murmur through the fast -falling leaves. The strange light moved with uncanny precision; it was located, and silently the armed men came out from their hiding place. They drew in upon the unsuspecting signaller. A moment's pause and, together, they dashed to the attack. It might mean a tough fight, and serious results for somebody, but there was no faltering or turning back. The affair did not last long. The offender was laid low by a well-aimed blow, though his figure could only be located by a line of shadow. Then the secret was revealed in its naked truth. An allotment holder, anxious to keep birds off his ground, had conceived the brilliant idea of hanging up a piece of an old broken looking-glass. It was tied with string to a big stick. As it swung it reflected any light there was in the sky.'[xv]

Of all the German spies who set foot in Folkestone, one name stands out from the others: Mata Hari. Travelling under her real name, Magaretha Gertruide Zelle, she arrived at the port on 4 December 1915, wishing to board a steamer to Dieppe. Her secret MI5 file has recently been made available online, and reveals what happened when she arrived at the desk of the MI5 officer Captain S Dillon. His report described Mata Hari as 39 years old, 5'5" tall and of 'medium stout' build. She was dressed 'fashionably in a brown costume with racoon fur trimmings and hat to match.' Dillon asked the woman to explain where she had been and where she was going. She proudly explained that she was the mistress of a Dutch army officer and was en route to Paris to collect some furniture; she then intended to return to get engagements to work on London and English provincial theatres. Dillon does not record whether they discussed the nature of Mata Hari's stage performances, though she was well known from pre-war days as an erotic dancer. Overall, she struck the Captain Dillon as a 'handsome and bold type of woman', who spoke several European languages; her story about the furniture was checked and verified and

the officer had little choice but to stamp her papers with permission to board the waiting ship to France. As Mata Hari sailed away, Dillon wrote up his report, concluding that, although there was nothing that he could put his finger on, he was not happy and he recommended that she should not be allowed to return to Britain.

It was thanks to the perceptive report by Captain Dillon in Folkestone, which was circulated both to British and French counter-intelligence agencies, that Captain Georges Ladoux, head of the French Deuxième Bureau, took a keen interest in Mata Hari after her arrival in France. Ladoux assembled a file of the woman's alleged spying activities, sufficient to arrest and bring her to trial in 1917; the finding of guilt was followed by the inevitable execution by firing squad.[xvi] Myths continue to surround the circumstances of her execution at Vincennes on 17 October 1917, and there remains doubt about the claim that she was responsible for the deaths of thousands of French soldiers. Certainly, she had worked for the Germans, though she claimed that she was also working for the French as a double-agent. The truth about this mysterious woman will probably never be known; even reliable judges of character cannot agree on her basic qualities. Captain Dillon of MI5 saw her as assured and educated whilst the head of German WW1 intelligence, Walter Nicolai, described her as a 'pitiful, deceitful, uneducated and stupid'.[xvii]

Among a roll call of men and women who found themselves in Folkestone during the First World War for the purpose of spying for or upon Great Britain, Mata Hari is probably the only name that is generally remembered today. Their motives, their achievements and their fates have been all but forgotten. In recalling the stories of some of them, perhaps their ghosts have briefly stirred and gathered together at the harbour and the secret meeting places in Folkestone that they frequented a century ago.

Chapter 12 British Counter-espionage; hunting German Spies in Britian

[i] Spy Peril, Hansard *HL Deb 25 November 1914 vol 18 cc129-73*

[ii] Several examples are to be found in Carlile, Folkestone during the War, 1914-1919 ibid

[iii] The case is reported in detail in the Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald of 10 August 1918.

[iv] Ferdinand Tuohy The Secret Corp. A Tale of Intelligence on all Fronts p44 Thomas Seltzer New York 1920@

[v] Ferdinand Tuohy. The Secret Corp. A Tale of Intelligence on all Fronts p44 Thomas Seltzer New York 1920@

[vi] MI5, The Investigation of Espionage 'G' Branch Report. TNA KV 1/43. This report, and many others, meaning from MI5 can be found and downloaded free of charge from TNA website, In these reports MI5 is identified as M.O.5 or as ' the Bureau', short for Special Intelligence Bureau.

[vii] See Wim Klinkert (2013) A spy's paradise? German espionage in the Netherlands, 1914–1918, Journal of Intelligence History, 12:1, 21-35, @ http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/16161262.2013.755017

[viii] See Thomas Boghardt. Spies of the Kaiser p108. Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire. 2004

[ix] J C Silber. The Invisible Weapon, Hutchinson & Co, London 1932

[x] The Secrets of Rue st Roch, Janet Morgan, p126. The account of Meau's escapades is worth reading.

[xi] In the Eagle's Claw, c1928, publisher unknown

[xii] For a detailed account of the Stanaway case, see: Nigel West (Ed). MI5 in the Great War. Biteback Publishing (31 July 2014). Also the MI5 file at TNA @

[xiii] MI5, The Investigation of Espionage 'G' Branch Report. TNA KV 1/42 para 1510

[xiv] Ibid para 1210

[xv] J C Carlile, Folkestone during the War p81

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