

Classical Spies: American Archaeologists with the OSS in World War II Greece

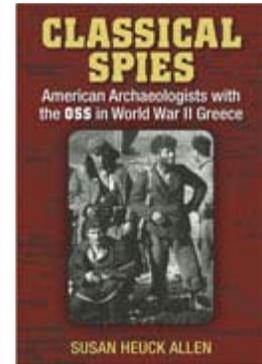
Susan Heuck Allen

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Q&A with Susan Heuck Allen, author of *Classical Spies: American Archaeologists with the OSS in World War II Greece*

Classical Spies is the first insiders' account of the operations of the American intelligence service in World War II Greece. Initiated by archaeologists in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, the network drew on scholars' personal contacts and knowledge of languages and terrain. While modern readers might think Indiana Jones is just a fantasy character, *Classical Spies* discloses events where even Indy would feel at home: burying Athenian dig records in an Egyptian tomb, activating prep-school connections to establish spies code-named Vulture and Chickadee, and organizing parachute drops.



Susan Heuck Allen reveals remarkable details about a remarkable group of individuals. Often mistaken for mild-mannered professors and scholars, such archaeologists as Princeton's Rodney Young, Cincinnati's Jack Caskey and Carl Blegen, Yale's Jerry Sperling and Dorothy Cox, and Bryn Mawr's Virginia Grace proved their mettle as effective spies in an intriguing game of cat and mouse with their Nazi counterparts. Relying on interviews with individuals sharing their stories for the first time, previously unpublished secret documents, private diaries and letters, and personal photographs, *Classical Spies* offers an exciting and personal perspective on the history of World War II.

An experienced archaeologist and author of many books and articles, including a volume on Frank Calvert's discovery of Troy, Susan Heuck Allen has taught at Yale University and Smith College and is currently Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classics, Brown University.

The University of Michigan Press: Archaeologists have often been accused of being spies even when they weren't. Can you talk a little about what drew these people into the world of spying?

Susan Heuck Allen: The archaeologists had several reasons for signing on with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the World War II predecessor of the CIA, not the least of which were the extraordinary circumstances of that war and the patriotism it engendered. But these men and women loved Greece and wanted desperately to help rid the country of its Axis occupiers. They had special expertise in language and topography that they were anxious to put to use, and, yes, there was the attraction of leaving the routine of their classrooms and digging while engaging in glamorous "spooking." Originally, they intended to pose as archaeologists, but ultimately went to their posts undercover as relief workers and U. S. Government military attachés, representatives of the Lend Lease Administration or the Office of War Information. Although the OSS archaeologists returned to their classrooms within a year of the end of the war, one soon abandoned academia for an intelligence career that lasted long into the Cold War.

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When I began my research, individuals at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens expressed some concern about the book and the danger of tainting archaeologists as spies. Archaeologists have often been employed as spies – the British and Germans used archaeology as cover long before World War II – and, in recent years, foreign governments have used archaeologists and anthropologists for espionage and intelligence. While ethicists debate the pros and cons of tainting the profession, the American military has recently imbedded anthropologists with troops in Iraq and the Archaeological Institute of America has endeavored to educate the military about cultural property issues in the areas where they serve in order to lessen wartime destruction. Whether or not American archaeologists are actually engaged in espionage at present is unclear. Yet, if they are good at their jobs, we will never know.

UMP: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens features prominently in your book, and of course the School has a long history of supporting the culture and citizens of Greece. If there hadn't been such a school in Athens, what do you think the effect might have been on Allied operations in the area?

SHA: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens has been the research home in Greece for U. S. citizens since 1881. It has provided them with a base for conducting research and study, a hostel, a meeting place, and administrative support for American excavations in Greece. Although the School is not a formal tool of American diplomacy as are the German Archaeological Institute and its French counterpart, the School is the preeminent American institution in Greece and at least one of its former leaders served as U. S. minister or ambassador to Greece. If there had been no School, the United States would have not been able to recruit a stable of experienced individuals, fluent in Greek, knowledgeable about the country and able to function independently and as a cohesive network. The U. S. would have had a far less coordinated body to conduct its clandestine work in Greece. American citizens in Greece would have had no rallying point before their evacuation from the country and the Greeks would have lacked a tangible symbol of hope during the horrific years of the Axis occupation. Although there were other organizations and institutions from which American spies could have been recruited, none of their members were as knowledgeable about strategic aspects of Greece nor did they constitute an already unified group who could be quickly transformed into a coherent and cooperative working unit. In a wartime OSS blueprint for postwar intelligence in Greece, archaeologists suggested various American educational institutions and businesses in Greece as deep cover for American intelligence operatives. For a decade during the Cold War, one OSS archaeologist served as the director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, but, as far as we know, CIA officers were housed at the U. S. embassy as “special assistants to the ambassador.”

UMP: Your work documents many conspicuous acts of bravery by Greek citizens. Are there any that especially struck you as exceptional?

SHA: Perhaps the one who stands out the most is Clio Adossides. She left her comfortable life as a concert pianist in Athens to nurse Greek soldiers fighting in Albania where the Greeks, against

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all odds, were successfully driving back the forces of an Italian invasion that had begun on October 28, 1940. Whereas many European countries had been overrun by the Axis juggernaut, it was the Greeks, vastly outnumbered and under equipped, who stood up to the Italians, chasing them out of Greece and back into Albania from whence they had attacked. While her husband flew reconnaissance missions for the Greek Air Force, Clio, all alone in a wooden hut in the freezing snow-deep mountains, gave first aid to soldiers who were dying of exposure. She was assisted during these harsh times by an American archaeologist who drove an ambulance and delivered supplies to her. The Greeks' collective response to the Italian invasion was one of conspicuous, passionate courage, not only from heroic soldiers, but also from civilians like Clio, who, after surviving the later battles of Crete and el Alamein, worked with the OSS archaeologists in Cairo, before returning to Greece with them.

UMP: The Greeks have long had a love of boats, right back to the Odyssey and Jason and the Argonauts. Could you talk a little about the important role boats played in pro-Greek activities?

SHA: Greek myths and legends preserve stories of harrowing voyages because navigation has always been dangerous in the unpredictable Aegean Sea and Mediterranean waters surrounding Greece. Furthermore, sea travel was essential for the Greeks whose territory includes hundreds of islands. For millennia, Greeks have had to take to the sea to communicate with their countrymen and seek out other civilizations, such as ancient Egypt, to trade for precious commodities. So, the Greeks are excellent seamen with a long history of navigation. When the Nazis occupied their country, Greek sailors posing as fishermen defied death to ferry spies and weapons into Greece, to evacuate Jews and British soldiers, and to bring food and medical supplies to lessen the suffering of their fellow countrymen. For the most part, they sailed caiques or small Greek fishing boats, the only form of transportation not totally suspect to the Germans. The Greek sailors usually traveled at night, navigating by the stars and moored next to uninhabited crags or pulled up on shore by day, where they slept, their vessels camouflaged by nets.

UMP: Many talented individuals died on both sides in the Greek theater. Who were some of the bigger losses, and why?

SHA: Civilians suffered the greatest casualties. Thousands of Greeks starved to death, especially in 1942, and the Germans killed thousands of Greek Jews from Thessaloniki at Auschwitz in 1943. Other Greeks died fighting in the various resistance factions that quickly grew up throughout Greece in the wake of the Nazi invasion on April 9, 1941. Americans only arrived in Greece in 1943 and, as non-combatants, they suffered few losses there. Those involved with Secret Intelligence who were killed, died from "friendly fire," shot by their British allies. By contrast, the British had fought openly in Greece since 1941 and marooned many of their soldiers there in the course of several evacuations. Some British archaeologists took part in special operations while others engaged in espionage like their American "cousins." Of these, the most prominent to die was John Pendlebury, an athletic Oxonian who had dug for a decade as the right-hand man of Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos on Crete and was the excavator of Tell el

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Amarna in Egypt. As British vice consul in Crete, he organized the Cretan resistance in case of invasion. When it came on May 20, 1941, his trainees fought valiantly and continued their heroic resistance throughout the war. Pendlebury, on the other hand, was captured by the Germans on the first day of the invasion and summarily executed, betrayed by his glass eye.

UMP: Why do you think so many of those involved in WWII spy operations around Greece did not much talk about it in later years?

SHA: When they joined the OSS, each archaeologist signed an oath to the U. S. government, swearing never to divulge information about their clandestine actions. They took this seriously and kept everything “hush-hush.” During the Cold War as Greece became a strategic bulwark between the free West and Soviet Eastern Europe, the United States engaged more directly in Greek affairs. At the same time, public perceptions of espionage in postwar United States and Greece underwent a paradigm shift. Throughout this period, the archaeologists kept quiet about their heroic and patriotic war work. After three decades, most only spoke about it only obliquely and then very reluctantly. I tracked down and contacted all of those who were still alive and had participated in these events. Many still felt bound by the oath they had taken more than 50 years earlier. Only with great difficulty did I convince them to tell me stories which they had planned to take to the grave.

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