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Vasili Arkhipov and Soviet submarine B-59, forced to the surface by U.S. Naval forces in the Caribbean near Cuba, with a U.S. helicopter overhead. Source: Olga Arkhipova, 1955, and Soviet submarine by U.S. Navy photographers, October 28, 1962, U.S. National Archives. Also see source materials at the National Security Archive at www.nsarchive.org and <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB75/#1V>

The Man Who Saved the World from a Nuclear War

Vasili Arkhipov was a Soviet submarine officer who prevented a Soviet nuclear strike against U.S. surface warships during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The attack would have caused a major global thermonuclear response.

In the fall of 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev secretly began the deployment of medium and intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba. On October 22, 1962, President John Kennedy ordered U.S. naval forces to enforce a naval “quarantine” of offensive military cargoes enroute to Cuba. On the same day, CIA Director John McCone informed President Kennedy that four Soviet submarines were positioned to reach Cuba within a week.

All four Soviet diesel-powered Foxtrot-class submarines in the flotilla were equipped with conventional torpedoes and one “Special Weapon”—a torpedo equipped with a 15-kiloton nuclear warhead. Soviet officers were told that in the absence of the possibility of communication with Moscow, only the agreement of the captain of the submarine and the political officer were needed to launch a nuclear torpedo. But on submarine B-59, due to Arkhipov’s position as chief of staff of the flotilla, all three officers on board B-59 had to agree unanimously to authorize a nuclear launch.

On October 27, 1962, a group of eleven U.S. Navy destroyers and the aircraft carrier USS Randolph located Soviet submarine B-59 near Cuba. Despite being in international waters, the U.S. Navy started dropping signaling depth charges, explosives intended to force the submarine to come to the surface for identification.

At this time, the Soviet crew had been out of contact with Moscow for several days and the submarine was too deep to monitor U.S. civilian radio broadcasts. The submarine’s batteries had run very low and the air conditioning had failed, causing extreme heat and high levels of carbon dioxide inside the submarine. Under these extreme conditions, the captain of the submarine, Valentin Savitsky, decided a war might have already started. As the depth charges exploded around his vessel, Captain Savitsky ordered the arming of the nuclear torpedo and came within minutes of launching it.

According to a Soviet intelligence report, an argument broke out on B-59, with Arkhipov alone blocking the launch. Arkhipov eventually persuaded Captain Savitsky to surface amid U.S. Navy vessels and await orders from Moscow.

No one on the U.S. side knew at the time that the Soviet submarines were nuclear-armed; no one knew that conditions in the submarines were so physically difficult and unstable that commanding officers, fearing they were under attack by U.S. forces, might consider arming and launching their nuclear torpedoes.

On November 2, 1962, Kennedy addressed the nation regarding the dismantling of the Soviet nuclear missile bases located in Cuba. All Soviet nuclear weapons were removed in the following months.

Strangely, many historians view the Cuban Missile Crisis as a triumph of rational leadership in both the Soviet Union and the United States. However, **it was the leadership in both countries that brought the world to the brink of annihilation in the first place—only to be prevented by a single Soviet naval officer.**

Today would be the 96th birthday of Vasili Arkhipov: born on January 30, 1926; retired as a Vice Admiral in the mid-1980s; and died on August 19, 1998.

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