Vasili Arkhipov and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Jonathan Minsung Kim

Seoul International School

jonathankim0519@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Public opinion, at the time and since the Cuban Missile Crisis, has been that President Kennedy played the most significant role in ending the crisis and preventing WWIII. Although it is difficult to deny this, it can be argued that VasiliArkhipov, a Soviet Naval Officer, played a more important role because he refused to launch a nuclear torpedo attack on the U.S. Navy. This paper discusses VasiliArkhipov's role in preventing the attack and argues that he should be credited much more emphatically in the annuals of history. It was in October 1962 when the American Navy spotted a Soviet submarine in the Caribbean. President Kennedy gave an order to blockade Cuba, so the American Navy started to drop depth charges left and right of the submarine. However, they were unaware that the submarine was nuclear-armed. The Soviet submarine captain, Valentin Savitsky, was considering firing on the U.S. ship. He ultimately decided to fire, and the second officer agreed; however, Soviet submarines required three people to agree to launch the nuclear torpedo. The two officers were expecting the third officer, VasiliArkhipov, to agree with them to launch the nuclear torpedo. However, VasiliArkhipov refused. The ship had not communicated with Moscow for eleven days, and Vasili did not want to launch the nuclear torpedo without receiving explicit orders from Moscow. Arkhipov was able to convince Savitsky not to fire. Had the nuclear torpedo been launched, the U.S. would have responded strongly, likely leading the world to World War III. However, this disastrous consequence was avoided, all because Vasili was calm and refused to attack. Soon after this, President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev agreed to end the Cuban Missile Crisis.

VASILI ARKHIPOV AND THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which happened at the height of the Cold War, has had a lasting impact on the international political landscape. At the time, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were at an all-time high. The global battle between communism and capitalism was rampant in the wake of the end of WWII.

Tensions came to a boil in October 1962 and could have easily resulted in World War III. Although it is generally thought that President Kennedy was the key figure at the center of mitigating the tensions, it is the unheralded Soviet Vice Admiral VasilyArkhipov who must be given most of the credit as he helped prevent all-out nuclear war. Though Arkhipov received orders to launch nuclear missiles at the Soviet's capitalist enemy, he refused. An act of disobedience that prevented a nuclear disaster and subsequent nuclear war.

To begin, tensions were fostered starting at the tail-end of the nineteenth century. Between 1895 and 1898, Cuba and the Philippines, Spanish colonials, revolted. Despite a vow of isolationism taken by the then young United States, American intervention pushed Cuba in the direction of independence (Trask, *The Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress). The Spanish met the initial Cuban revolt with brute force despite American President Grover Cleveland pressing Spain to make a settlement (Trask, *The Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress). The brutalism employed by the Spanish resulted in the Americans engaging in *yellow journalism* – the use of shock, sublime, and

attention-grabbing headlines within media outlets to sway readers in a favorable direction (History.com). The result gave sympathy to the United States. In 1897 after the election of a new American President (William McKinley), tensions began to increase. By February 1898, an American vessel – the USS Maine – exploded off Havana's coast, killing 260 Americans: an event blamed on external agents (History.com).Reluctantly,President McKinley authorized the use of American force and demanded immediate Spanish withdrawal from Cuba. The president also renounced any American design to annex Cuba after Spanish departure. From the Cuban perspective, though they appreciated American sympathy and support, there was a lingering fear that the United States would annex their island upon independence (Trask, *The Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress).

By April 1898, the Americans and the Spanish declared war on one another. Spain attempted to rally European support to its cause, but American power and decades of Spanish isolationism from European affairs prevented this (Trask, *The Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress). The American Navy, headed by its Secretary Theodore Roosevelt, was much more powerful than the Spanish. President McKinley negotiated with the Spanish through the intermediary of the French ambassador to the US, Jules Cambon, towards the end of the conflict. By August, the two had reached a deal that the Spanish would cede Puerto Rico and Guam to the Americans and defer the Philippines for further negotiation (Trask, *The Spanish-American War*, Library of Congress). The result was the proposal of the Treaty of Paris in late 1898. Spanish acceptance of the treaty renounced all claims to Cuba, ceded Guam and Puerto Rico to the Americans, and extended American sovereignty to the Philippines for a hefty sum (History.com). With the defeat of the Spanish, American troops would occupy Cuba until 1901. In that same year, the American government issued the Platt Amendment: despite renouncing any intention of Cuban annexation, the United States reserved the right to interfere in the "preservation of Cuban independence and government maintenance" (Library of Congress). American victory established the country as a global superpower and planted the seeds of American global imperialism.

The Platt Amendment allowed the American government to meddle in Cuban political affairs under the guise of preserving liberty. The amendment also shaped the relations between young Cuba and the United States for the next thirty-six years (Encyclopedia Britannica). The treaty granted Cuba some of the independence it longed for but simultaneously limited it. Cuba was not allowed to cede land to anybody. Still, the United States was prohibited from entering any international treaty that would "compromise its independence" and had to sell or lease lands for American naval or coal mining interests (such as Guantanamo Bay) (U.S. Dept. of State). The U.S. promised it would not invade or annex the island. Through the treaty, the United States reserved control of Cuba while legally skirting around its wartime Teller Amendment – a promise not to annex the island. Though promising no annexation, the McKinley administration had managed to find a legal loophole in the legislation to maintain a great deal of control of the region. Unsurprisingly, the newly independent Cuba was not thrilled about this proposition, especially given that it has just been freed from its Spanish colonizers. The Americans increased the pressure by promising to buy large amounts of Cuban sugar, thereby weaponizing their market (and advantage) over Cuba with economic stimulus promises (U.S. Dept. of State). Despite its unpopularity, the Platt Amendment adhered to the Cuban Constitution until 1934, when it was mutually redacted under President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Encyclopedia Britannica).

As a republic, Cubans held more public office than they had under the Spanish (Encyclopedia Britannica). The American promise to buy Cuban sugar significantly increased its economy. In May 1902, the island elected its first president: Thomás Estrada Palma, however political instability on the island at times led to American intervention. President Theodore Roosevelt even had to briefly install his Secretary of War (and eventual successor) William Howard Taft as a Cuban Governor (Encyclopedia Britannica). Years of political turmoil and race issues coupled with sugar's fluctuating price through the First World War (1914-1918) resulted in decades of instability within the Cuban government. In June 1934, President Franklin Roosevelt repealed the Platt Amendment as he saw it as the source of much Cuban political conflict. Through a series of presidents

and several political revolts, a Cuban colonel, Fulgencio Batista, held steady and consistent army control. In 1940 Batista submitted his presidential candidacy; backed by the United States, he became president from 1940-1944. Batista entered the Second World War (1939-1945) on the allies' side and established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (Encyclopedia Britannica). Though a successor was elected after Batista, corruption and unpopularity led Batista to stage a non-violent coup and seize power in 1952 (Encyclopedia Britannica). Sudden legislation in the United States in 1956 aimed at stimulating the American sugar industry began to stifle the Cuban economy seriously: Cuba was headed for economic turmoil (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Political and economic strife resulted in the July 26 Movement, headed by the charismatic Fidel Castro. Well-versed in law and educated in Havana, Castro brought followers to the island,including South American revolutionary Che Guevara in 1956 (History.com). Fearful of Castro's leftist ideology, the United States continued to back Batista (History.com). American fears were based on the scenario that if a leftist government was installed on the island, it would nationalize property, seizing their landholdings. Such a government would be a more considerable burden for the United States to deal with. By 1957 Batista banned freedom of assembly and expression in an attempt to curtail the growing following of Castro (Encyclopedia Britannica). The increasingly oppressive regime of Batista led the Americans to withdraw their support for the dictator quietly. Between Batista's oppression and Castro's leftist ideology, the Americans had to look for an alternative to both – a feat that would prove impossible at the time (History.com). Castro employed his natural charisma and romantic nationalist sentiment to win favor. By 1958 civil unrest had turned violent; the United States imposed an arms embargo on Cuba, halting the exportation of weapons to the island (Encyclopedia Britannica). Batista and the Cuban National army fought with Castro's forces. Castro increased his strength and support amongst the average Cuban. (Encyclopedia Britannica). On New Year's Day 1959, Batista and his followers fled Cuba and went to the Dominican Republic (History.com). Castro seized the opportunity, established himself as a leader, nationalized American property on the island, and strengthened relations with the Soviet Union (History.com). The United States

immediately severed ties to Cuba and imposed a trade and travel embargo on the island – some of which were loosened under the Obama Administration.

As a communist with Soviet sympathies, Fidel Castro became ardently anti-American. Castro embodied the American ideological enemy in the western hemisphere. In March 1960, President Eisenhower instructed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to orchestrate an invasion of Cuba to oust its new government in favor of a new puppet, pro-American administration (JFK Library). Before his inauguration in January 1961, then-President-elect Kennedy was briefed by the CIA on the plans. The CIA planned to supply weapons to the fourteen hundred Cuban exiles who left the island in the wake of Castro's coup; the exiles were funded, trained, and turned into counterrevolutionaries by the American government (U.S. Dept. of State). The preliminary investigation of the conditions in Cuba concluded three primary objectives and possibilities, quoted directly from the briefing report from the attorney general in 1960:

> "(1) overthrow of the Castro regime was possible; (2) sugar crop should be attacked at once; (3) action to be taken to keep Castro so busy with internal problems (economic, political, social) that Castro would have no time for meddling abroad especially in Latin America" (National Security Archive)

In order to destabilize Cuba prior to the assault, the Americans spread anti-Castro propaganda through the island (Matthew Nerkowski, The Bay of Pigs). The Americans successfully set up a training camp in Guatemala and organized a small fighting force educated in assault landing and guerilla warfare (JFK Library). The leader on the ground of the American-funded fighting force was José Miró Cardona, a former Castro government member. Cardona was being groomed as the pro-American puppet successor to Castro (JFK Library). By April 1961, President Kennedy authorized the Eisenhower-penned invasion of Cuba: the infamous Bay of Pigs.

President Kennedy was seriously concerned about the Soviet response to the attack. It was, after all, the USSR who stepped in to purchase Cuban sugar to keep Castro's economy alive after the United States severed economic ties with the island (History.com). Though Kennedy concluded that Castro himself posed no threat to the United States, it

was his broader ideological leanings and his budding relationship with Nikita Khrushchev – the leader of the Soviet Union – that was of concern. As a result, the American government did as much as it could to keep the operation covert. The Cubans learned about the invasion through various channels, and it was a disaster from the start. On April 15, 1961, eight American World War Two era bombers (painted to look like Cuban fighters) left Nicaragua to bomb Cuban airfields but missed many of their intended targets (JFK Library). Castro's air force was left mostly intact. A second strike was planned but delayed by Kennedy due to the failure of the first. On April 17, 1961, the American-backed Cuban brigade began its invasion at the island's southern shore – the Bay of Pigs. American reconnaissance failed to see an operating radio station on the beach, which subsequently reported every detail of the assault (History.com). The unit was immediately met with heavy fire. The Cuban air force destroyed much of the assaulting air force, two escort ships sank after hitting a large coral reef, bad weather hindered the infantry, and backup paratroopers landed in the wrong place (History.com; JFK Library). Under Fidel Castro's direct command, the Cuban force defeated the exiles; they surrendered within less than one day.

The CIA assumed that President Kennedy would authorize the American military to step in, but he did not, claiming that doing so would start a conflict that would lead to World War Three (History.com). The Bay of Pigs failure proved to be a stain on the Kennedy administration. The disastrous assault also significantly strengthened the Castro administration, which openly proclaimed intentions to adopt socialism and strengthen its ties to the Soviet Union (U.S. Dept. of State). American confidence in defense of democracy and capitalism waned, and the Soviets achieved newfound confidence in their socialist ideology's international standing. Non-democratic countries around the world had a sudden warped perception of democracy exemplified by the United States (Matthew Nerkowski, The Bay of Pigs). Socialism and its embodiment by the Soviet Union were suddenly painted in a newer, more positive light. With the romantic image of democracy in recession, the stage was now set for the Cuban Missile Crisis, which occurred just one year after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion.

President Kennedy organized what was known as Operation Mongoose in the wake of the Bay of Pigs– plans to destabilize and sabotage the Cuban government, which did not rule out Castro's potential assassination (JFK Library). Castro himself increased correspondence with the Soviets, with American intelligence reporting increased Cuban importation of Soviet arms and weaponry as early as spring 1962 (U.S. Dept. of State). By October 1962, tensions of the Cold War peaked. The two nuclear superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union almost began a nuclear war, with Cuba caught in the middle. Through mid to late 1962, Khrushchev and Castro arranged a secret armament deal: Soviet nuclear missiles were spotted in Cuba by the U.S., with the construction of launch sites starting as early as summer 1962 (U.S. Dept. of State).

In October, correspondence from Castro to Khrushchev (referring to the latter as "comrade") reads:

> "(…) the first and likeliest [variant] is an air attack against certain targets (…) the second, less probable, although possible, is an invasion."

> "if the second variant is implemented and the imperialists [Americans] invade Cuba (…), the danger that that aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great (…) that the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike."

> "(…) the imperialists, disregarding world public opinion, (…) and ignoring the law are blockading the seas, violating our airspace, and preparing an invasion."

> "you [Khrushchev] have been and continue to be a tireless defender of peace, and I realize how bitter these hours must be when the outcome of your superhuman efforts is threatened."

> (National Security Archive)

Fidel Castro used rhetoric that refers to the Americans as an imperialist power; he sets up the Soviet Union as the defenders of global peace and liberty. A worrisome Castro for his own people's sanctity and sovereignty pleads with Khrushchev over American imposition and proximity to his socialist domain. With relative control of the airspace, an American U-2 aircraft took several surveillance photographs

of medium and intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs) under construction in Cuba on October 14, 1962 (U.S. Dept. of State). The Cuban Missile Crisis had reached its height.

President Kennedy issued a naval "quarantine" of Cuba and sent a message to Nikita Khrushchev demanding the immediate dismantling of all nuclear missiles in Cuba (U.S. Dept. of State). Kennedy cited the Monroe Doctrine – a policy issued by President James Monroe in 1823 to the European powers that reserved all political affairs within the western hemisphere under the United States jurisdiction. Khrushchev responded that the American "blockade" was an act of aggression and interfered with Soviet trade (U.S. Dept. of State). The distinction of the wording is significant: Kennedy's use of the word "quarantine" is not defined as a wartime act, and therefore does not legally bind to war; Khrushchev employing the term "blockade" is, by definition, a wartime term and policy. The heightened state of tensions led to the United States armed forces moving to DEFCON 2 – an indication of imminent war involving the Strategic Air Command (U.S. Dept. of State). On October 22, 1962, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy delivered a speech to the American people explaining the situation with a surprising degree of transparency:

> "This government has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba."

> "(…) unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites are now in preparation on that imprisoned island."

> "several [installations] include medium-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead (…) more than 1000 nautical miles."

> "[additional intermediate sites] (…) can range as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada, and as far south as Lima, Peru."

> "[this contributes to] an explicit threat to the peace andsecurity of all the Americas."

> "(…) I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare forany eventualities."

> "(…) I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations."

Kennedy consulted with his closest advisors, some of whom advocated a direct course of action by suggesting aggressive aerial bombing of the missile sites (U.S. Dept. of State).

The president decided upon a diplomatic route, imposed the quarantine, the DEFCON 2 issue, and addressed the nation all in the same day.

A Soviet submarine waited patiently under the Caribbean Sea. When the American Navy discovered the vessel on radar, they assumed she had broken the quarantine and began to drop depth charges – no sea traffic was permitted. American intentions were to force the vessel to surface for identification – intentions they had informed Moscow about (National Geographic). The Americans were oblivious to the fact that the vessel was equipped with a tactical nuclear torpedo, which was primed and available to launch (National Geographic). The vessel was rocked with each explosion. The officer in charge, Soviet Commander Valentin Savitsky, questioned and debated as to his response. The crew had not received liaison from Moscow for days; above them sat eleven American ships – all possible targets (National Geographic).Isolated from the world, Savitsky thought perhaps a war had already started, and perhaps it was his duty to return fire. Savitsky ordered the torpedo be launched (National Geographic). An order of that nature required the approval of three commanding officers: one of the officers, VasiliAlexandrovichArkhipov, for an unknown reason, never approved the order (National Geographic).

VasiliArkhipov was born to a peasant family in the outskirts of Moscow, Russia, in 1926. He saw military action as a minesweeper in the Russo-Japanese War of August 1945. He graduated from Naval School just two years later (Signs of the Times). VasiliArkhipov was appointed Deputy Commander of a K-19 submarine in 1961 – one of the first Russian submarine models (Signs of the Times). While conducting training exercises off Greenland's coast,Arkhipov's vessel experienced a leak in its nuclear reactor coolant system. The crew came up with a makeshift solution to the detriment of their own lives: each of them, including Arkhipov, was irradiated, and many sailors died as

a result of the high levels of the radiation they received. Arkhipov was accustomed to working in and solving high-pressure situations. The clear thinking and level-headedness he maintained during the crisis proved critical for its successful outcome. One year later, in 1962, at the height of both the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Arkhipov found himself in command of one of four Soviet submarine vessels sent to Cuba (PBS). Each of the vessels was equipped with a nuclear warhead with a capacity equal to the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima (PBS). While most Soviet submarines required the turnkey of only two acting commanders, the vessel Arkhipov was in joint command of (a B-59) required three (PBS).

On October 27, 1962, Soviet Commander Valentin Savitsky issued the order to launch the nuclear warhead attached to the B-59, assuming World War Three had begun. His second in command, the second of three turnkeys agreed. The crew was facing enormous pressures: depth charges detonating all around the vessel, stifling air due to a broken air conditioner, and the oxygen supply was dwindling (PBS). For reasons not fully understood, VasiliArkhipov did not agree to launch – avoiding nuclear war. Though the American Navy had informed Moscow that the depth charges were to force the vessel to surface for identification, Moscow had no way of informing the crew (Future of Life). Despite being under extreme pressure, Arkhipov– described by his family as a kind and soft-spoken man – kept a level head and single-handedly averted World War Three (Future of Life). The family of VasiliArkhipov has since been awarded the Future of Life award for his heroism and level-headed thinking – a gift to every subsequent generation since October 27, 1962.

The Russian vessel did eventually surface, and the crew awaited orders from Moscow. The Cuban Missile Crisis ended just a few days later. Arkhipov had gained a formidable reputation from the events a year prior in 1961 – the disastrous training exercise off Greenland's coast (Signs of the Times). His background and reputation likely added authority. As a member of the crew on the K-19 in 1961, Arkhipov worked (and solved) a high-stake and high-pressure crisis in the past. Further, though the vessel and its commanders had the authorization to fire without Moscow's approval, VasiliArkhipov still insisted on waiting to hear from the Soviet capital (Signs of the Times). These two factors combined staved Arkhipov's hand and swayed the

crew in the same direction. This fundamentally crucial episode of the Cuban Missile Crisis (and the Cold War in general) went completely unheralded in the west until the fall of the Soviet Union. After the Crisis, Arkhipov returned to Russia and continued to serve in the Navy. In 1981, he was promoted to the rank of Vice Rear Admiral and retired a few years later, and finally succumbed to radiation poisoning in 1998 at the age of 72 (Signs of the Times).

Between October 16, 1962, and October 29, 1962, President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev negotiated extensively. To the surprise of all the western world, Khrushchev was willing to remove his nuclear arsenal from Cuba. As early as October 26, 1962 (one day before the episode involving Arkhipov), Nikita Khrushchev told the president he was willing to remove the Soviet arsenal under certain conditions (U.S. Dept. of State). The full agreement became: The Soviet Union would be willing to remove her nuclear weaponry from Cuba provided the United States promised not to invade the island; the United States would remove her nuclear arsenal from Turkey and Italy (History Engine). The agreement endowed the Caribbean island with a right to self-governance and pursued communist ideology. The crisis bolstered the reputation not just of Kennedy but of the United States as a whole – restoring its global ideological status and eclipsing the embarrassing episode of the Bay of Pigs (U.S. Dept. of State). Peaceful diplomatic negotiations were feasible thanks to VasiliArkhipov; had he turned his launch key one day after Khrushchev's diplomatic promise, all would have been lost.

Who played the most extensive role in the de-escalation of the crisis? Scholars argue that it was President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy insisted on working diplomatically with his Russian ideological rival despite his advisors suggesting otherwise (U.S. Dept. of State). If Kennedy had not acted rationally, he would have plunged the world into a third World War; VasiliArkhipov acted in a similarly calm and rational way. Khrushchev himself was also willing to work diplomatically and in a balanced fashion. Khrushchev was the first to offer Soviet removal of missiles from the island as early as October 26.

Of these major figures through the crisis, VasiliArkhipov played the most crucial and central role. Had he approved Savitsky's proposal to attack, the vessel would have launched

a nuclear attack despite peaceful talks occurring through diplomatic channels. Without political authorization from either side – though Arkhipov's vessel was given sovereignty to launch without approval from Moscow – the world would have plunged into World War Three. Such an event would have triggered a series of terrible events and nuclear retaliation that would have led to a scale of warfare not yet seen by humanity. The consequences would have been catastrophic. But thanks to VasiliArkhipov, his steady hand and calm, clear thinking provided the actors' space and time to discuss the affairs peacefully.

For his heroic performance in the Cuban Missile Crisis, VasiliArkhipov was awarded the British/American Future of Life Award decades after the crisis. His daughter and grandson accepted the award in 2017 on his behalf. The quiet humility of VasiliArkhipov was cited by his daughter, who claimed that Arkhipov "always thought that he did what he had to do and never saw his actions as heroism (…)" (Future of Life). Jaan Tallinn, the co-founder of the Future of Life Institute, claimed: "given that this century will likely bring technologies that can be even more dangerous than nukes, we will badly need more people like Arkhipov (…) (Future of Life). VasiliArkhipov's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis cannot be understated and must never be forgotten.

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