Vasili Arkhipov: The man who saved the world



In all likelihood, you owe your life to a man you've probably never heard of; Vasili Alexandrovich Arkhipov.

It all goes back to 27 October 1962, arguably the most dangerous day in world history; in the midst of what was known as the 'Cuban Missile Crisis'.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a time of heightened confrontation between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Cuba during the *Cold War*.

It happened when the Soviet Union (USSR) began building missile sites in Cuba in 1962. It may have been the moment when the Cold War came closest to a nuclear war.

There was a coup in Cuba in 1959. A small group led by Fidel Castro took power in this Cuban Revolution. The new government took over some American businesses, and consequently the American government refused to buy anything from Cuba after that. The US embargo against Cuba began February 7, 1962.

In 1962, the American government was worried that the USSR would attack America from Cuba, because Cuba is near enough that the missiles could reach almost any city in America. Cuba was seen by the US as a Communist country, like the Soviet Union.

The USSR sent missiles into Cuba in order to deter the US from initiating a nuclear attack against them from Turkey, using the *Jupiter* missiles they had there, which were capable of striking the USSR.

In October 1962, American ships blocked Soviet ships carrying missiles from going into Cuba. An American spy plane had been shot down over Cuba while another had got lost and strayed into Soviet airspace. As these events increased tensions between the US and the USSR beyond breaking point, an American destroyer -the USS Beale- began to drop depth charges on a Soviet submarine; one which –little did they know- was armed with a nuclear weapon.

The captain of the submarine, Valentin Savitsky, had no way of knowing that the depth charges were non-lethal "practice" rounds intended as warning shots in order to force the submarine to surface and surrender. The Beale was soon joined by other US destroyers, who joined the Beale to attack the submerged submarine with more explosives. The exhausted Savitsky assumed that his submarine was doomed and that world war three had broken out. He ordered the submarine's nuclear torpedo to be prepared for firing. Its target was the USS Randolf, the giant aircraft carrier leading the task force.

If the submarine's torpedo had vaporised the Randolf, the nuclear clouds would quickly have spread from sea to land. The first targets would have been Moscow, London, the airbases of East Anglia and troops in Germany. The next wave of bombs would have wiped out "economic targets", a euphemism for civilian populations – more than half of the UK population would have died.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon's *Single Integrated Operational Plan* –a retaliatory plan, should the US be attacked with nuclear weapons– would have hurled 5,500 nuclear weapons against a thousand targets, including ones in non-belligerent states such as Albania and China.

The decision not to start world war three was not taken in the Kremlin or the White House, but in the sweltering control room of a submarine. The launch of the submarine's nuclear torpedo required the consent of all three senior officers aboard. Vasili Arkhipov alone refused permission to launch the nuclear torpedo. By preventing the attack, and preferring to choose sense and compassion over revenge, Vasili Arkhipov effectively saved the lives of millions of people, and their descendants. He also prevented huge swathes of Earth from becoming inhospitable nuclear wasteland.

It is *certain* that Arkhipov's reputation was a key factor in the control room debate. The previous year, the young officer had exposed himself to severe radiation in order to save a submarine with an overheating reactor. That radiation dose eventually contributed to his death in 1998.

The Soviets and Cubans agreed to take away the missiles if America promised not to attack Cuba. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US government secretly agreed to remove the *Jupiter* missiles from Turkey in exchange for the withdrawal of all Russian nuclear weapons from Cuba.

Why did the USSR move missiles to Cuba?

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What would have happened if the submarine had launched its nuclear torpedoes?

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What did Vasili Arkhipov do, and what effect did it have?

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How did the *Cuban Missile Crisis* end?

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