

## SOVIETS CLOSE TO USING A-BOMB IN 1962 CRISIS, FORUM IS TOLD

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It was the most dangerous moment of the Cold War. At about 5 p.m. on Oct. 27, 1962, a Soviet submarine armed with a nuclear warhead found itself trapped and being bombarded by a US warship patrolling off Cuba

One of the Soviet captains gave the order to prepare to fire. But a cooler-headed officer persuaded him to wait for instructions from Moscow before unleashing a nuclear attack.

"We thought - that's it - the end," Vadim Orlov, a Soviet intelligence officer, was quoted as saying in recently declassified documents from the Cuban missile crisis.

The details on just how close the United States and the Soviet Union came to nuclear war emerged during a three-day conference sponsored by the private National Security Archive, Brown University, and the Cuban government marking the 40th anniversary of the crisis. Although the discovery that Soviet submarines were armed with nuclear weapons was revealed about a year ago, this was the first time key players in the 13-day crisis had sat down to analyze the implications of the Oct. 27 incident.

Participants in the meeting, which ends today with a tour of the missile site, include President Fidel Castro of Cuba and other top Cuban officials, former Kennedy administration officials, and former Soviet military officers, as well as scholars from all three countries.

Until recently, scholars believed that the United States had come within days of nuclear war. Kennedy sent a letter to the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, promising not to invade Cuba if the Soviets removed missiles from Cuba. Kennedy believed that if Khrushchev refused he had no choice but to order a full-scale attack on Cuba.

Only this weekend did many missile-crisis experts learn how much closer the world had come to nuclear war - and how Kennedy himself may not have been the most crucial figure in averting it.

"The lesson from this is that a guy called Vasili Arkhipov saved the world," said Thomas Blanton, director of the National Security Archive. He was referring to the Soviet captain who prevailed on his fellow officers not to fire the nuclear torpedo.

US destroyers under orders to enforce a naval quarantine off Cuba did not know that the submarines the Soviets had sent to protect their ships were carrying nuclear weapons. So the Americans began firing depth charges to force the submarines to the surface, a move the Soviets interpreted as the start of World War III.

"We're going to blast them now! We will die, but we will sink them all. We will not disgrace our navy," the Soviet intelligence report quotes the first Soviet captain as saying before his co-officer calmed him down.

Blanton said he became convinced of what went on in the submarine after he cross-referenced that version with newly released deck logs from the US destroyers. He confirmed Arkhipov's role after the former officer did not deny the version described in the intelligence report, which was declassified shortly before his death three years ago.

Conference participants pored over thousands of documents declassified since 1992, many of which shed new light on sensitive issues such as US efforts to remove Castro. Cuban officials used the documents in arguing that they had legitimate reasons to believe Washington intended to invade Cuba, and that Castro was justified in seeking Soviet protection.

"It's clear from all the documents that if subversive activity didn't work, the option was an armed invasion," said Esteban Morales, head of Cuba's Center for the Study of the United States.

Among key documents was a declassified Defense Department memo from 1961 describing a three-step plan for the "US endeavor to cause the overthrow of the Castro government." The strategy was to stage intensive military exercises near Cuba to provoke a hostile reaction from Castro, which would give Washington the justification it needed to "destroy Castro with speed, force and determination."

Robert McNamara, Kennedy's defense secretary and a key conference participant, conceded Friday night that Cuba was justified in fearing an attack. "If I were in Cuban or Soviet shoes, I would have thought so, too," he said. "We as a superpower did not look through to the ends of our actions. That was a real weakness."

Participants emphasized that any new knowledge should be used to help avoid future conflict, in particular a potential US war with Iraq. "God willing, someone will be sitting down in Baghdad and talking about this moment in 40 years" if a war is averted, said Christopher Kennedy Lawford, President Kennedy's nephew. Lawford, who played a US pilot in a film about the crisis, "13 Days," was among several members of the film's team attending the conference.

The parallel between Kennedy's handling of the crisis and President Bush's deliberations over Iraq was a recurrent theme at the meeting, with many participants accusing Bush of ignoring history.

"There are lessons to be learned," said Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a former Kennedy aide and a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian. "This was not only the most dangerous moment of the Cold War. It was the most dangerous moment in human history."

Asked whether he thought the conference could play a role in influencing Bush against invading Iraq, Schlesinger said no.

"Kennedy chose quarantine as an alternative to military action," he said. "Bush is committed to military action."

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