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Author: Peter A. Huchthausen
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Prologue

If I take the wings of the morning
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me
And your right hand hold me fast.

Psalm 139:9–10

In the fall of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union came as close as they ever would to global nuclear war. The confrontation came after Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev was caught in the act of secretly deploying nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles to Fidel Castro's Cuba. What is not widely known is that the showdown with the Soviet Union nearly led to an exchange of tactical nuclear weapons at sea between ships and submarines of the opposing navies. We now know from participants on both sides that a naval shoot-out very nearly occurred. This account is based on the recollections of men who had their fingers on the triggers.

The gravity of the encounter was first revealed in 1992, when parts of the long-guarded files of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were opened. Although many KGB and Ministry of Defense files were released to researchers shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Central Committee files were stored separately and guarded as politically sensitive. Items from these files have been selectively released by the government of the Russian Federation.

Central Committee files released in January 1992 state that the Soviet Politburo had given their military commander in Cuba in 1962,

General Issa Pliyev, the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons against U.S. ships and landing forces without prior approval from Moscow. The following quote from a dispatch from Soviet defense minister Rodion Malinovsky to General Pliyev in Havana in early October 1962 was made public in 1992:

Only in the event of a landing of the opponent's forces on the island of Cuba and if there is a concentration of enemy ships with landing forces near the coast of Cuba, in its territorial waters . . . and there is no possibility of receiving orders from the USSR Ministry of Defense, you are personally allowed as an exception to take the decision to apply the tactical LUNA missiles as a means of local destruction of the opponent on land and on the coast with the aim of a full crushing defeat of troops on the territory of Cuba and the defense of the Cuban Revolution.¹

General Anatoly Gribkov, who was chief of operational planning on the Soviet General Staff in 1962, stated during a Cuban crisis reunion hosted by Fidel Castro in Havana in January 1992 that in addition to medium-range SS-4 missiles in Cuba, *Luna* (also known as *Frog* by NATO) missiles with nuclear warheads had already been provided to Soviet forces. These had one-hundred-kiloton warheads and a twenty-five-mile range. It has since been learned from Soviet records that the four submarines sent as the advance brigade to make its home port in Cuba as part of Operation *Kama* (the naval phase of Operation *Anadyr*, the code name for the overall plot to introduce strategic weapons in Cuba) had been equipped with tactical nuclear-tipped torpedoes and given the same authority to use them if an attack by U.S. Navy ships appeared imminent.

The Cuban missile crisis and its outcome provide a classic study of the successful use of diplomacy backed by superior sea power. The Soviet Navy was operating in unfamiliar waters with inferior naval forces and without air support. The advantageous naval position enjoyed by the United States forced a choice on Khrushchev between hostilities and certain defeat, or withdrawal and a major diplomatic setback. The major reversal for the Soviet leader eventually resulted in his political defeat and forced retirement.

The confrontation was a pivotal moment for the Soviet fleet, leading to resumption of an aggressive naval construction program, which continued until the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. By that

time the USSR had achieved status as the world's largest and second most powerful navy.

Historians and command and control experts have pondered the Cuban missile crisis in great depth and continue to offer new analysis. During the thirty-year anniversary observations of the Cuban episode in 1992, a number of surviving senior decision makers from the three sides met in Havana and Moscow for reunions and roundtable critiques. New information revealed at those gatherings confirmed that the situation came even closer to a nuclear exchange than either the United States or the Soviet Union leadership realized. Escalation to a nuclear exchange might have resulted in grave injury to the United States, but it certainly would have led to a disastrous Soviet defeat. The results of the crisis had a profound impact on subsequent overall Soviet military policy as well as the naval construction program.

The Soviet Navy before the Cuban confrontation consisted of twenty-five conventional cruisers, fewer than one hundred destroyers, and large numbers of small combatants. It also included more than three hundred diesel-powered submarines, more than half of which were long-range attack boats. The Soviet Union already possessed more than the total number of diesel attack submarines Nazi Germany had operated at the peak of its strength in World War II.

Until 1962, however, Soviet naval forces were seldom deployed far from home waters. Despite our suspicions of the quality of the fleet at the time, we learned only in 1995 that Soviet submarine forces deployed during the crisis—all long-range diesel subs of the Project 641 type, called Foxtrot class in the West—had been equipped with nuclear-tipped torpedoes in Sayda Bay.

The Cuban confrontation served as a dramatic arena where the U.S. Navy, for the first time since World War II, looked seriously into the eyes of a genuine naval opponent, which, although still a light-weight, was capable of inflicting serious damage. Until this point the Soviet Navy had confined its operations to supporting the massive Soviet ground army in Europe and Asia. However, for many years the Soviets had dreamed of becoming a naval power.

One of the dreamers was Sergei Georgevich Gorshkov. As Peter the Great was known as the father of the Russian Navy, surely Admiral of the Fleet and twice Hero of the Soviet Union Gorshkov was father of the modern Soviet Navy. Gorshkov, who joined the navy at age seventeen, became an admiral at age thirty-one and served for twenty-seven

years as its commander in chief, presiding longer and through more significant changes than any other single Soviet naval leader. His rapid rise to the rank of admiral was due largely to his brilliance as a naval commander during what the Russians call the Great Patriotic War (World War II). He emerged from the war as one of the few senior Soviet naval heroes, mostly due to his actions during the campaign in Odessa on the Black Sea and as commander of the Danube River Flotilla. The navy emerged from the war as a nearly intact but small force commanded by the popular Admiral Nikolai G. Kuznetsov.

In October 1955, two years after Nikita Khrushchev became Communist Party first secretary, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet 24,000-ton flagship battleship *Novorossysk* exploded and sank in Sevastopol Harbor with the loss of 608 navy men. (*Novorossysk* was the former Italian battleship *Giulio Caesar*, transferred to the USSR in 1949 as war reparations.) In the aftermath of the official investigation into the causes for the sinking—to this day still a major controversy in Russia—Khrushchev summarily removed and demoted navy commander in chief Kuznetsov, elevated war hero Admiral Gorshkov to commander in chief, and abruptly reversed Stalin's postwar naval expansion. Khrushchev directed the disposal of many large surface warships and a halt to their further construction. According to Khrushchev, a nonsailor:

Navy surface ships are good only for carrying heads of state on official visits; they have outlived their time. They're good only as missile platforms. This year to date we have destined practically all cruisers to the scrap heap.

Khrushchev stopped the aggressive heavy cruiser construction projects in midcourse. He redirected naval thinking to a defensive strategy anchored on a strong submarine force and a surface fleet restricted to coastal defense on the flanks of a massive ground army. Khrushchev, with the support of his first defense chief, Marshal Georgii Zhukov, the celebrated World War II ground army commander, sought to cut costs of new military construction while still retaining a gigantic land force. Expenditures for new naval building were drastically reduced. As a result, by 1957 the Soviet Navy was reduced to a force of fewer than 500,000 men; more than 350 ships had been mothballed. The navy cuts had been accompanied by a controversial debate on the value of a conventional surface navy dominated by cruisers. The large diesel attack submarine construction program also was reduced and deferred in favor

of building nuclear and missile submarines with more sophisticated capabilities.

The new navy chief, Gorshkov, then presided over the transformation of the defensive Soviet fleet into a powerful navy of the nuclear era. He proceeded with the disposal of obsolete battleships and older cruisers following Khrushchev's dictum, and stopped the new all-gun cruiser building plans, scrapping many unfinished hulls still on the building ways.

Gorshkov carried out the policies trumpeted in the droning jargon of the Communist Party Central Committee that called for a revolution in military affairs, and began transforming the conventional navy into an offensive, long-range missile and nuclear force. But the transformation was slow starting and fraught with difficulty. During the ensuing quarter century of extraordinary Soviet Navy expansion, the pattern of the enormous loss of life aboard *Novorossysk* would haunt the Soviet Navy as they launched unprecedented numbers of submarines and modern, lighter, and missile-equipped surface ships in the race to become the world's largest navy. The stampede into the nuclear power arena resulted in scores of serious accidents aboard their prototype classes of submarines. The first nuclear submarine, *K-3*, burned, killing thirty-nine, and their first nuclear-powered ballistic missile sub, *K-19*, suffered so many fatal accidents she was nicknamed "Hiroshima."

Then astonishingly in 1962 in Leningrad, during the height of the Cuban crisis, the mercurial Khrushchev reproached Admiral Gorshkov while the navy searched frantically for appropriate escorts for their merchant ships being challenged en route to Cuba. "We need ships with autonomy and long range as escorts to Cuba," roared the angry Khrushchev. "How could you be without any?"

"But sir," replied Gorshkov, "you ordered them destroyed."

"I ordered no such thing," countered the first secretary.

Khrushchev denied not only that he had given the order to destroy all large surface combatants but that he ever knew about the sinking of battleship *Novorossysk*, or that he knew of the sinking of Admiral Kuznetsov.

This was the situation in 1962 when the Soviet Union launched its secret Operation *Anadyr*.

