

NEW EVIDENCE ON THE

USING KGB DOCUMENTS: THE SCALI-FEKLISOV CHANNEL IN THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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From the time that former State Department official Roger Hilsman revealed in 1964 that ABC News television correspondent John Scali had served as an intermediary between the U.S. and Soviet governments at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, scholars have had to consider the role that Scali and his contact, Aleksandr Feklisov (alias Fomin), played in the resolution of the conflict.¹ Until 1989, it was generally assumed that the Kremlin had used Feklisov, a KGB officer based at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, to float a trial balloon at the most dangerous moment of the Cuban Missile Crisis because meaningful communication between the two governments had ground to a halt.

But at a conference of scholars and former officials in Moscow in January 1989, Feklisov argued that Western historians had gotten his role in the crisis all wrong. The Kremlin, he said, had not injected him into

negotiations. The famous proposal for ending the crisis, which Robert Kennedy later recalled as having made his brother "for the first time hopeful that our efforts might possibly be successful," had not come from him, but rather had come out of the blue from Scali. Scali, who was also present in Moscow, vigorously disputed Feklisov's account.²

Feklisov's surprising assertion³ and Scali's immediate rejection of this revisionist history posed three questions for students of the crisis:

- a) Did the Soviet government use the KGB to find a way out of the crisis on 26 October 1962?
- b) Did Feklisov act on his own or did Scali suggest a settlement for his own government to consider?
- c) What effect, if any, did the Scali-Feklisov meetings have on the endgame of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Materials consulted in the archives of the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service, the new name for the First Chief Directorate of the KGB), resolve some, though not all, of these questions. Documents on the Scali-Feklisov meetings have been opened as part of a multi-book project on the history of the

superpower intelligence services sponsored by Crown Publishers, Inc.⁴

To understand better what can be learned from these documents, it is helpful to revisit the standard account of the role of the Scali-Feklisov channel in the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

According to the traditional version, Scali received a call at his Washington office from Feklisov on Friday, October 26. Scali had been meeting off and on with this Soviet Embassy official for over a year. From the FBI, which Scali had alerted from the outset about his meetings with Feklisov, the journalist learned that this man was no ordinary diplomat. Aleksandr Feklisov ("Fomin") was the KGB Resident, or chief of station, in Washington. On this particular Friday, with the likelihood of US military action against Cuba seemingly mounting, Feklisov asked for an urgent meeting with Scali. Scali suggested the Occidental Restaurant near the Willard Hotel. The lunch was set for 1:30 p.m.

"When I arrived he was already sitting at the table as usual, facing the door. He seemed tired, haggard and alarmed in contrast to the usual calm, low-key appearance

continued on page 60

KGB DOCUMENTS

continued from page 58

that he presented.” Thus Scali described in a 1964 television broadcast how this meeting opened. Scali said that Feklisov feared that war would begin soon, and was so concerned that he volunteered a way out of the stalemate.⁵

He asked, according to Scali’s notes, what Scali “thought” of a three-point proposition:

a) The Soviet missiles bases would be dismantled under United Nations supervision.

b) Fidel Castro would promise never to accept offensive weapons of any kind, ever.

c) In return for the above, the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba.⁶

Feklisov was confident that if U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson “pursued this line,” Soviet UN ambassador Valerian Zorin “would be interested.” As if to give some weight to his proposal, Feklisov noted that the Cuban delegate to the UN had already made a similar proposal in a session of the Security Council but that it had been met with silence. Feklisov asked that Scali run this proposal by his contacts at the State Department and then gave the journalist his home telephone number, to be sure he could be reached at any time.⁷

Scali rushed this proposal to the State Department. Roger Hilsman, State’s director of Intelligence and Research, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk were extremely interested in it. Rusk considered this to be the first concrete offer from the Soviet leadership for ending the crisis. The letters already exchanged by Khrushchev and Kennedy had only brought about a hardening of each side’s position. So long as the Soviets refused to discuss removing the missiles, there seemed to be no peaceful way out of the deepening crisis.⁸

Transcripts of the ExComm [Executive Committee of the National Security Council] meeting of October 27⁹ confirm that the Kennedy administration interpreted the “offer” from the KGB representative as an elaboration of a more general proposal contained in a private letter from Khrushchev that arrived late in the afternoon of October 26, in which the Soviet leader had written:

We, for our part, will declare that our

ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists will be obviated.¹⁰

By itself the Khrushchev letter did not promise anything except that future Soviet ships would carry non-military cargoes. But when the letter was coupled with what Scali had relayed from Feklisov, the Kennedy administration believed it had received an acceptable offer from the Kremlin. Rusk instructed Scali to contact Feklisov to make clear that the U.S. found a basis for agreement in his offer.

Sometime between 7:30 and 7:45 p.m. on Friday evening, Scali and Feklisov met at the Statler Hotel, near the Soviet Embassy. In a very brief meeting Scali conveyed his message: He was authorized by the highest authority to say that there were “real possibilities in this [proposal]” and that “the representatives of the USSR and the United States in New York can work this matter out with [UN Secretary General] U Thant and with each other.” Feklisov listened carefully, then repeated the proposal to be sure that he understood the White House’s offer correctly. Unsure of Scali, he asked repeatedly for confirmation that Scali spoke for the White House. Finally, Feklisov added that it was not enough for there to be inspection of the dismantling of Soviet missiles, it would be necessary for UN observers to observe the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the southern United States. This idea went beyond Scali’s instructions, so he demurred.

The situation changed the next day, October 27, which U.S. veterans of the Missile Crisis describe as “Black Saturday.” Just as the ExComm was discussing a formal response to the Khrushchev letter and the Feklisov proposal, a second message arrived from Moscow, which this time immediately publicized the communication. Khrushchev had upped the ante. Now he demanded that the U.S. dismantle its Jupiter missile bases in Turkey before he went ahead with any deal that would strip Cuba of Soviet missiles. Scali was sent to see Feklisov to register the U.S. government’s strong disapproval of the new terms. Although Feklisov defended his government’s new position, the KGB Resi-

dent remained hopeful that the Kremlin would ultimately accept the October 26 proposal as the basis for a resolution of the crisis. Indeed, Kennedy’s response to Khrushchev offered to accept the implicit terms of October 26 and ignored the Turkish issue raised in Khrushchev’s letter of the 27th. The crisis ended the next morning, Sunday, October 28, with the Kremlin’s public announcement of a deal—a withdrawal of Soviet missiles in exchange for a U.S. guarantee not to invade Cuba—that seemed to incorporate much of what John Scali and Aleksandr Feklisov had discussed. Both men were proud of their accomplishment.

KGB records suggest that neither the traditional version nor Feklisov’s revision is entirely accurate. Feklisov’s cables to Moscow from October 26 and October 27 and evidence of how the KGB handled them suggest strongly that the Soviet government did not initiate the proposals that Scali presented to Rusk on the afternoon of October 26.

Feklisov’s cables, moreover, paint a different picture of his relationship with the American journalist. The KGB Resident considered him an intelligence contact, with whom he could exchange political information. In his cable to Moscow on October 26, Feklisov felt he had to introduce Scali to the KGB. “We have been meeting for over a year,” he wrote. This statement, of course, would not have been necessary had Moscow already considered Scali a channel to the U.S. government. In previous cables Feklisov had referred to Scali only using a codename. This was the first time he introduced him and mentioned his position with ABC News.

Feklisov’s cable describing his first meeting with Scali on October 26 is almost a mirror image of the account that Scali gave Rusk. In Feklisov’s version, Scali is the one who is fearful of war. After assuring Feklisov that the U.S. was planning air strikes and an amphibious landing on Cuba in the next 48 hours, Scali asked if the United States attacked Cuba, “would West Berlin be occupied?” Feklisov reported that he had replied defiantly that all heaven and earth might fall upon NATO if the U.S. were to attack Cuba. “At the very least,” he said, “the Soviet Union would occupy West Berlin.” Feklisov added that given the size of Soviet conventional forces on the line dividing East and West Germany, the situation would be very

difficult for the West. And to make matters worse, he expected the crisis to unify the entire Socialist bloc, including China. Perhaps for dramatic effect, Feklisov assured his American interlocutor that the Cubans, and especially Castro, were ready to die like heroes.¹¹

Feklisov's report to the KGB Center creates the impression that the direction taken by the discussion depressed Scali even further. "A horrible conflict lies ahead," Scali said after hearing what the Soviet response would be to the use of American military force against Cuba. According to Feklisov, Scali fell into such a state of anxiety that he began to muse about possible ways out of the conflict. "Why couldn't Fidel Castro give a speech saying that he was prepared to dismantle and to remove the missile installations if President Kennedy gave a guarantee not to attack Cuba?" Scali is reported to have asked.¹²

What is most significant about the version that Feklisov cabled to Moscow is that the KGB resident did not take Scali's musings as a formal U.S. offer. Instead of grasping this as a proposal, Feklisov told Scali that what he was saying sounded a lot like something already proposed by the Cubans in the Security Council, which had been ignored by U.S. Ambassador Stevenson. Although Scali responded that he could not recall any American rejection of a similar Cuban proposal, he said he was convinced that such a demarche at this time by Castro would meet with a positive reaction from U.S. civilian and military circles.

Scali's confidence surprised Feklisov, who began to wonder whether indeed Scali might know something about the White House's negotiating strategy. When Feklisov inquired as to exactly who might be interested in this kind of proposal, Scali avoided giving any names. This was as far as he would go. As Scali and Feklisov parted, the KGB officer concluded that despite having taken an interesting turn, the meeting itself had been inconclusive.

It is also significant that in his memoirs, Feklisov does not mention anything about having discussed a political solution with Scali at the first October 26 meeting. In fact, Feklisov categorically denies that he or Scali made any attempts to formulate a way out of the crisis at that time. Here the evidence from the SVR archives contradicts Feklisov's memoirs and suggests that Feklisov has, for

whatever reason, forgotten the balance of his historic conversation with Scali.¹³

The SVR record on the second Scali-Feklisov meeting of October 26 is less controversial. The account that Feklisov cabled to Moscow differs little from what the American journalist reported to the State Department. Feklisov reported that Scali, who had initiated the meeting, laid out a formula that could be the basis for negotiations between Stevenson and Zorin at the UN. The only difference between the Feklisov and Scali accounts is that whereas Feklisov described this as a new American proposal, Scali relayed to the State Department that Feklisov had responded energetically to word of formal U.S. interest in the Soviet proposal first mentioned at the Occidental Restaurant.¹⁴

After this second meeting with Scali, Feklisov sent a long cable to Moscow, detailing both of his conversations with Scali. In retrospect, it seems odd that at a time when the Kremlin was hungry for any news about U.S. intentions, Feklisov would have waited so long to inform Moscow as to what John Scali was telling him. Feklisov was accustomed to cabling his superiors at all hours. And he had approximately five hours between the end of the lunch and his next discussion with Scali to tell KGB Center that something was going on. In his memoirs, Feklisov has explained this gap by saying that he did not expect anything to come of his discussion with Scali. Indeed, he writes that he did not even bother to mention the meeting to the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoli Dobrynin, until 4 p.m. Then, just as he was in the midst of giving this report to Dobrynin, Feklisov received Scali's request for a second meeting. Not only did Feklisov have to leave the embassy before completing his briefing for Dobrynin but he had to put off cabling Moscow until returning from the Statler Hotel.¹⁵

There was soon to be as much confusion in Moscow over what Feklisov was doing as in Dobrynin's embassy. The KGB had no warning that its representative in Washington had established, albeit unwittingly, a channel to the Kennedys. When Feklisov's long cable arrived in Moscow at 2:20 p.m., Saturday, October 27 (Moscow time was eight hours ahead of EST), the chief of the First Chief Directorate (FCD), the foreign intelligence division of the KGB, forwarded this telegram directly to the chairman of the KGB, Vladimir Semichastny.¹⁶

In following the course taken by this important telegram, we see that it could not have played any role in shaping Khrushchev's letter of October 26, which proposed a U.S. guarantee of the territorial integrity of Cuba as a means of resolving the crisis, or even in influencing the letter of October 27 that asserted a parallel between U.S. bases in Turkey and the Soviet missile installations in Cuba.

Feklisov's telegram arrived in Moscow well after (nearly a full day) Khrushchev had sent his letter of October 26 to Kennedy. Because it was not expected that Feklisov would act as a channel for resolving the crisis, this telegram was not given priority treatment. After deciphering and summarizing the telegram, which took the usual hour, the FCD sent the telegram to the Secretariat of the KGB, which was the headquarters staff of the Chairman, Semichastny. Inexplicably, the telegram sat in Semichastny's office for another four hours before the Chairman decided to send it to Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. This delay was so long that by the time the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a copy of the Feklisov cable, Khrushchev had already sent his second, October 27 letter to Kennedy referring to the Jupiters in Turkey.¹⁷

The Scali-Feklisov meeting on October 27 looms even less significant in Russian records. Again Khrushchev could not have seen it in time to affect his strategy toward the Americans. Feklisov sent a short report after Scali scolded him for Khrushchev's new position on resolving the missile crisis. This cable did not reach the Chairman of the KGB until 4:40 p.m. on October 28. Semichastny's reaction was to forward the letter to the Foreign Ministry, where it arrived at 7 p.m. Moscow time, an hour after Khrushchev had publicly accepted the Kennedy administration's terms for ending the crisis.¹⁸

The KGB materials substantiate claims that for the Kremlin the Scali-Feklisov meetings were a sideshow that played no part in the U.S.-Soviet endgame of October 26-28. Although of less consequence in light of this information, it is nevertheless interesting to consider the contradiction between the contemporaneous accounts by Feklisov and Scali of their meetings on October 26. Did Feklisov violate KGB procedure and present a completely unauthorized settlement formula? Or, at the other extreme, did Scali use the KGB

resident to test some ideas that had occurred to him as perhaps the best way of averting nuclear disaster?

The KGB documents suggest that in the heat of discussion, with the fear of war hanging over their heads, Scali and Feklisov fastened on a revival of a formula for ending the crisis that, among others, UN Secretary General U Thant had been suggesting since October 24.¹⁹ Because of the possibility that Feklisov and/or Scali mischaracterized their first meeting on October 26, it may never be possible to resolve the central contradiction between their respective claims. However, the determination of which man actually proposed this plan is less important than the fact that, although the Kremlin was completely in the dark, John F. Kennedy was convinced that Feklisov spoke for the Soviet government, and indeed for Khrushchev personally.

As we now know, President Kennedy decided not to use the Scali-Feklisov channel to settle the crisis. On the night of October 27, JFK sent his brother Robert to Dobrynin to offer a face-saving deal to Khrushchev. In addition to pledging not to invade Cuba, Kennedy offered a secret undertaking to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey. Nevertheless, the story of the Scali-Feklisov backchannel remains significant as a prime example of how governments can misinterpret each other, especially in the grip of a crisis.

1. *The New York Times* broke the story of John Scali's role in the Cuban missile crisis on 4 August 1964. It was reported that *Look* magazine was about to publish an excerpt from Roger Hilsman's forthcoming book on foreign policymaking in the Kennedy years that named Scali as an intermediary between the U.S. and Soviet governments at the climax of the missile crisis. Just as Hilsman's piece was to appear in print, John Scali discussed his meetings with the Soviet KGB official, "Mr. X," on an ABC news special of 13 August 1964. Transcript, Cuban Missile Crisis Collection, National Security Archive, Washington, D.C. *U.S. News & World Report* carried an article about Hilsman's revelation in its 17 August 1964 issue. Hilsman's excerpt finally appeared in the 25 August 1964 issue of *Look*. A few months later, in its 25 October 1964 edition, *Family Weekly* published Scali's "I Was the Secret Go-Between in the Cuban Crisis." Pierre Salinger, Hilsman and Robert Kennedy all attested to the importance of the Scali channel in autobiographical books: *With Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 274-280; *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), 217-223; and *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), 90-91. Salinger's *With Kennedy* quoted directly from notes that John Scali had

made after each of his meetings with the KGB officer.

2. The Moscow conference was one of a series of five conferences between 1987 and 1992 involving, at first, U.S. scholars and former officials, who were later joined by Soviet and then Cuban counterparts. The conferences were organized by James G. Blight, initially at Harvard University's Center for Science and International Affairs and later at Brown University's Center for Foreign Policy Development. For the Feklisov-Scali exchange, see Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, eds., *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 112-14; 117-18. Feklisov elaborated on his testimony in his memoirs, *Za Okeanom i Na Ostrovye* (Moscow: DEM, 1994), 222-40.

3. It appears that Feklisov first made this assertion to a Russian scholar in 1987. A year later, Georgi Kornienko, who had been the Counsellor in the Soviet Embassy at the time of the Missile Crisis, told Raymond Garthoff that on 26 October 1962 the Embassy had been confused by Feklisov's account of his first meeting with Scali. Neither Kornienko nor the ambassador, Anatoli Dobrynin, was sure whether it had been Scali or Feklisov who had made the proposal. See Garthoff's revised edition of *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1989), 80-81. A 1988 article by Garthoff was the first published account of the Scali-Feklisov channel to raise doubts as to whether Feklisov had been authorized by the Kremlin to make his proposal. See Raymond L. Garthoff, "Cuban Missile Crisis: The Soviet Story," *Foreign Policy* 72 (Fall 1988).

4. Thus far, Crown has four books under contract. Each book will be written by a team. The Fursenko/Naftali study of the superpowers and Cuba, 1958-1963, will be the first book in the series. It will be followed by a history of Soviet intelligence penetration of the British government by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev; a study of KGB-CIA operations in Berlin by George Bailey, Serge Kondrashev, and David Murphy; and a history of Soviet intelligence operations in the United States by Alexander Vassiliev and Allen Weinstein.

5. ABC news special of 13 August 1964. Transcript, Cuban Missile Crisis Collection, National Security Archive.

6. Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 177-79. In their first public accounts, both Scali and Hilsman misremembered the details of the proposal. They had Khrushchev giving the pledge to keep Cuba free of offensive weapons, not Fidel Castro. This flawed version of the "Soviet" proposal gained wide currency when Graham T. Allison featured it in his influential *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 260, 263. For Scali's confidential description on 26 October 1962 of what he had just heard from Feklisov, which confirms Abel's and Salinger's accounts, see "John Scali's notes of first meeting with Soviet embassy counselor and KGB officer Alexandr Fomin, October 26, 1962," Document 43 in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, (New York: New Press, 1992), 184.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*, 217-19.

9. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, *Presidential Recordings*, Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, 27 October 1962, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA.

10. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 26 October 1962, in Chang

and Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 185-88.

11. Feklisov to KGB Center, 26 October 1962, Delo 116, T.1., SVR Archives, Moscow.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Feklisov, *Za Okeanom u Na Ostrovye*, 223-25.

14. Feklisov to KGB Center, 27 October 1962, Delo 116, T.1., SVR Archives; John Scali, Report of 27 October 1962 Meeting, Cuban Missile Crisis Collection, National Security Archive.

15. Feklisov, *Za Okeanom u Na Ostrove*, 225. There is a problem with Feklisov's chronology. Scali's call actually came later than 4 or 5 p.m. Unless his meeting with Dobrynin actually occurred three hours later than he said, Feklisov should have had enough time to brief the Soviet ambassador and to send a cable to Moscow. After returning from the second meeting, Feklisov continued to wait before sending Moscow any word on his meetings with Scali. The long cable was not sent until approximately midnight, four hours after Feklisov and Scali parted. At a September 1994 conference in Moscow, entitled "The Caribbean Crisis in the Archives of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Cuba and the United States," Dobrynin and Feklisov argued over the reasons for the delays in sending a KGB cable on the Scali meetings. Feklisov alleged that he waited to give Dobrynin the opportunity to sign the cable; but when the latter stubbornly refused to do so, he sent it anyway. The former Soviet ambassador rejected this account, saying that Feklisov had not needed his signature to send a KGB cable.

16. Spravka on Feklisov's October 26 telegram on Scali, Delo 116, T. 1., SVR Archives.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Spravka on Delivery of Scali report of 27 October 1962, *ibid.*

19. U Thant, "Statement in the Security Council," 24 October 1962, in Andrew W. Cordier and Max Harrelson, eds., *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations, VI: U Thant, 1961-1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 237-240.

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