

THE “GHOST OF PEACE”: PIERRE TRUDEAU’S SEARCH FOR PEACE, 1982-84

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This article explores the efforts of Canada’s Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to mount a ‘peace mission’ to defuse the sharply rising East-West tensions in late 1983. It explores the role of the peace movement in convincing him to act and examines his initial meetings with his foreign and defence advisors as he tried to enlist the support of Canada’s foreign policy establishment. The paper goes on to trace the prime minister’s struggle to garner support for his effort from the leaders of the major nuclear powers. Despite some marginal successes, Trudeau was prevented by the expectations of his Western allies from delivering key elements of his message, leaving him frustrated and increasingly isolated among Western leaders.

By the spring of 1983, Canada’s fifteenth prime minister, the dramatic and quixotic Pierre Trudeau, was on the verge of retiring, his reputation as an opponent of nuclear weapons in tatters. His recent decision to test the new American cruise missile in northern Canada—an alliance commitment—had galvanised the country’s nascent peace movement. In Vancouver alone, 65,000 people took to the streets in the largest peace demonstration Canadians had ever seen.¹ The marches continued throughout the summer, with Trudeau’s effigy, perched atop a cardboard cruise missile, often hoisted before jeering protesters. Canada, their leaders complained, “has chosen the wrong crowd. We’ve chosen to hang around the street corners of the world with nuclear terrorists.”²

The peace movement’s denunciations upset the Canadian prime minister, who was daily becoming more frustrated by NATO’s failure to engage the Soviet Union in meaningful arms control talks. After a summer of quiet reflection, Trudeau decided to act alone in August 1983, launching a high-profile peace mission to mobilize world opinion and force political leaders to the negotiating table. This was no easy task and Trudeau soon found himself stuck in a struggle to keep his initiative moving on two

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