

## Pierre Trudeau's 1983 Peace Initiative

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During the fall of 1983 Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau launched his peace initiatives campaign with hopes that he would be able to achieve a less hostile relationship between the East and West. The effectiveness of Trudeau's policies have often been debated, with most arguing that his foreign policies, and cries for peace were pointless with no results on the world stage. Trudeau was unable to gain the support of the arguable two most powerful/influential countries in the West, the United States and Britain. The year of 1983 was an especially hostile year for the relations between the Eastern Bloc, and the Western Powers. Both sides would put out very hostile rhetoric when referring to the other. President Reagan would imply the Soviet government was the root of all evil doings within the modern world.<sup>1</sup> The Soviets would reply with equally harsh rebuttals. It was clear that the American government did not take Trudeau's peace campaign as serious as he may have portrayed, when only two days after Trudeau would initially call for peace, the Americans would invade the small nation of Grenada. Trudeau's attempts to foster communications, and a more friendly relationship between the Americans and the Soviet Union were happening at the same time as Reagan was being to already change the rhetoric which his administration were publishing.

The month before Trudeau launched his campaign of peace the tragic incident involving a Koran airplane would occur. September 1 1983 a Koran commercial flight with 269 passengers abroad had departed from New York stopping briefly in Alaska before continuing on their journey. Within this group of 269, there was a mix of American and Canadian passengers among the others. After departing from Anchorage Alaska, the pilot flew the plane a mere 365 miles off their course and into what would have been Soviet airspace. As a result of this drifting into Soviet air the army would shoot down the plane, resulting in all souls on board being lost. At the time there were debates about whether this was a tragic accident, or an intentional hit with full knowledge that this was a commercial flight with nothing more than civilians. The American government would claim that this was an ordered attack from the Soviet government. Bill Casey who worked with the Central Intelligence Agency claimed that when coming across the stray plane in Soviet air, the Russian pilot would indicate to his commanders that the markings on the plane made it clear that this was a commercial flight. American President Reagan would call the incident an "act of

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<sup>1</sup> Beth A. Fischer, "The Trudeau Peace Initiative and the end of the Cold War: Catalyst or Coincidence?" *International Journal* 49 no. 3 (1994), 613.

barbarism” as a result of a “society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life.”<sup>2</sup> To add fuel to this fire, the Soviet government denied that the incident took place.<sup>3</sup> This denial would build onto the anger of not only the American government, but many of the Western powers (excluding Canada.) Later the Soviet government would acknowledge that the event did actually occur, however they believed that the passengers onboard were not civilians, but agents involved in spying to benefit the American population.<sup>4</sup> The Canadians would claim that they had intercepted intelligence that would state that this was not the case, that in fact the pilot stated that he was not close enough to fully determine what the markings of the plane showed.<sup>5</sup> Trudeau would argue that he did not believe that this was an intentional taking of civilian life. He would argue within the House of Commons that the shooting down of flight KAL 007 was a tragic accident, and not a slight on the part of the Soviet Union, though the denial of on the parts of the Soviets would not be over looked on his part. This denial would cause Trudeau to worry that these two superpowers would spark a war, using this accident as the starting point. With fears that this tragic accident would cause a war in which neither side would win, Trudeau would begin working on what would be come to known as his peace initiatives.

Seeing the tensions begin to rise between the East and West Trudeau would begin to search for ways in which he could open communications between the two sides. During 1983 and especially after the KAL 007 there was very little communication between the American government and the Soviet Union. It was Trudeau’s intentions to find ways in which the lines of communication could be opened up between the two countries and hostility lessened, for he feared that the relationship between the two countries was becoming too high-risk. It was during a meeting on September 21, 1983 that Trudeau would establish a small group (which contained members of the National Defense), whose primary focus would be on researching how best Trudeau could foster peace between the East and West (with the hostile relations between the Americans and Soviets at the forefront).<sup>6</sup> This group would be tasked with creating several proposals for the Prime Minister in a short period of time. Within the first two weeks of existence, they would create a packet of different proposals that were submitted to Trudeau, of which he would select only a very few which would be become the foundation for his plans of peace. There were two very distinct parts to the proposal put forth

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer, 613.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 614.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Kinsman, “Who is my Neighbour? Trudeau and Foreign Policy,” *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 57 no.1 (2003): 166.

<sup>6</sup> Brett Thompson, “Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s Peace Initiative: 25 Years On,” *International Journal* 64 no.4 (2009): 1123.

by the group. First would be regarding arms control among the various nations. The main point of the second half would be in regards to troops throughout Europe.<sup>7</sup> Among the selection would be a proposal of a summit meeting with the five nuclear powers (the Americans, Britain, France, China and the Soviet Union) to speak on the idea of limiting their respective arsenals. The group wished to establish different ways in which they could slow the arms race between the two opposing sides. Trudeau also would encourage a banning on high-altitude anti-satellite weapons.<sup>8</sup> Just weeks after this research group was created Trudeau's official rhetoric of peace would be made public.

On October 7 1983, a mere two months after the tragic accident of flight KAL 007, Trudeau would launch his official campaign of peace. This campaign would begin with a conference at the University of Guelph in Ontario. This conference would see the foundations of Trudeau's peace initiatives would be established. It was at this meeting that the proposals from Trudeau's research group would be made public. Trudeau declared at this meeting that part of his plan would be to travel to meet with several major heads of state to discuss different ways in which he believed that peace could be established. Of these ideas he proposed an open discussion with the various leaders on topics such as nuclear weapons. Trudeau stated during his speech that

It is my personal purpose to live up to the undertaking, made by the leaders at the Williamsburg summit<sup>9</sup> in May 1983, to devote our full political resources to reducing the threat of war. Not to work for building authentic meaningful confidence would amount to a form of escapism. The first form of escapism, as well defined by the Harvard Nuclear Study Group in their book, *Living with Nuclear Weapons* is to believe that nuclear weapons will go away. They will not. The second form of escapism enunciated by the Harvard Group is to think that nuclear weapons can be treated like any other military weapons in history. It is clear that they cannot.<sup>10</sup>

Within this speech Trudeau firmly establishes that he wishes to create discussion on the use of nuclear, expanding on what was previously spoken about during the ninth G7 summit meeting.

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<sup>7</sup> Fischer, 617.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The ninth G7 summit meeting consisting of France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Trudeau, "Strategies for Peace and Security in a Nuclear Age," presented at the University of Guelph (27-30 October 1983), 11.

Following the peace conference at the University of Guelph, Trudeau would travel across Europe, and to the United States trying to spread his message of peace and gain support, all while trying to open up lines of communication between the Eastern Bloc, and the Western Powers. In November 1983 Trudeau would take a 5-day political trip to Europe to discuss his views. His travels would not end there; in the first three months that would follow the peace conference in Guelph, Trudeau would stop in fifteen different nation capitals to speak with 58 separate leaders.<sup>11</sup> Trudeau had hoped that he would be able to end his political tour with the last two visits being with Moscow followed by Washington. His thoughts were that if he had met with Moscow first than Washington would feel as though they would receive the upper hand, as Trudeau would be able to reveal of the thoughts of the Soviet Union. However due to circumstances beyond their control Trudeau was unable to first stop in Moscow, but had to go to Washington instead.

On December 15 1983 Trudeau would arrive in Washington to have a private meeting with President Reagan.<sup>12</sup> Trudeau – knowing that Reagan was not a man who would worry about the small details, but would rather focus on the bigger picture of events – led this discussion in this manner hoping to have the President put some consideration into his proposals. Trudeau hoped that if he had Reagan discuss his thoughts on peace with Moscow instead of arms control he would better accomplish his goals of a less hostile relationship between the two countries. Reagan and Trudeau were two people who were from two differing political thoughts. Reagan would listen to what Trudeau had to say, however many would claim he was only being polite, and not taking the advice with Trudeau wished to share. The meeting between the two leaders had very different effects on each of them. Trudeau left feeling a great sense of enthusiasm that a peace between the differing countries was imminent, whereas Reagan was less optimistic.

The changes which occurred within American policies towards the Soviets Union were not directly affected by Trudeau's visit to Washington. In the beginning of Reagan's term as President (1981-83) his administration and the rhetoric that they produced was very harsh towards the Soviet Union. They wanted to stop the Soviets in what they viewed as their very expansionist practices. The American government also wished to try and prevent the spread of communism outside of the Soviet Union. Within these first years of Reagan's term there was little to no communication between the American government and the Soviet. Within his first three years in office Reagan would decline all invitations to meet with Soviet leaders. This would only further the growing tension. Also within these first few years Reagan would claim that during the

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<sup>11</sup> Fischer, 618.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

detente years, Moscow had failed to slow in their production in arms, therefore he felt has though the American defenses were gravely behind that of the Russians. As a result of this Reagan would allot a budget of 1.357 trillion US dollars to modernizing and strengthening their defenses (making this the largest peace time expansion.)<sup>13</sup> Shortly following Trudeau's visit to Washington, Reagan would publically address his nation with his views on the Soviet Union. It was clear within the speech that Reagan's words were much less hostile, with his focus being on trying to find similarities between the two countries, and avoiding their differences. Reagan would take this time to address his hopes for the future, with a much more open and friendly relationship with the Soviet Union.

The timing of Reagan's address to the country with the obviously less harsh rhetoric towards to Soviet, with the close proximity to the Trudeau meeting would make it appear as though Reagan had took the advice of the Canadian Prime Minister to heart, and was willing to change. The reality of the matter was that Reagan and his government had already begun to change their policies towards to Soviets a month before the meeting with Trudeau.

Trudeau's peace initiatives were not as effective as he would portray them to be. The creditability of Trudeau's attempts of an international peace is debatable. Trudeau in his different terms as Prime Minister would state that he was more interested in domestic policies, which would affect Canadians, and that foreign policies would always be an afterthought for him. Trudeau wanted to spend his time in office on the major events happening in Canada, such as the sovereign movements in Quebec, allowing foreign affairs to be handled by NATO, and the other Western powers. Even when focusing on foreign affairs, Trudeau would only look at them in how they would affect the lives of Canadians, giving very little thought to other nations.<sup>14</sup> 1983 saw Trudeau's political career coming to an end. Some would argue that Trudeau's peace initiatives were his attempts of ending his career on a high, with peace between the Eastern Bloc and Western Powers.

For Trudeau's peace initiatives to have been successful, the Americans and Soviets would have to change their policies towards each other. Though after a meeting between Trudeau and Reagan took place, the Americans did begin to change their policies it was not as a result of Trudeau. Robert Fowler felt as though the American government was dismissive of Trudeau's attempts to change American attitudes, because the Americans did not view Canada as a country which had a very large voice on the world stage. Fowler would state in an interview that he felt that Reagan thought that Trudeau's meddling into the relations between the East and West worrisome.<sup>15</sup> These changes had been

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<sup>13</sup> Fischer, 622.

<sup>14</sup> John Noble, interview by Alexander von Plato, January 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Fowler, interview by Alexander von Plato, January 2013.

running parallel to Trudeau on campaigns of peace. November of 1983 (one month before the meeting with Trudeau in December) saw Reagan creating a committee of his own to look to change the policies towards the Soviet, and opening up their lines of communication, with the possibility of a meeting between the two countries occurring.

Trudeau's peace initiatives were not a success in bringing about the end of the Cold War. He was unable to gain the support of the Americans (evident in their disregard of Trudeau's call for peace when they invaded Grenada.) Many of the European nations did not muster much enthusiasm for Trudeau's campaign. British Minister Margaret Thatcher would side with the Americans. Thatcher openly stated that she wished to have nothing to do with Trudeau's peace initiatives, and that he had misplaced his trust in the Soviet Union. Trudeau's European trip appears as though he was attempting to shame the Americans into changing their policies towards the Soviets. However this attempt could have undermined what the American government had already putting in motion to build a better relationship with the Soviets. If the American government view Trudeau's political meetings around Europe as an attempt of pressuring them to change, there would be the potential to halt all policies moving forward in fear as though the Americans were giving into international pressures, and appearing weak.