

Rhea Clyman: A Forgotten Canadian Eyewitness to the Hunger of 1932

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Abstract: In September 1932, a 28-year old freelance journalist from Toronto named Rhea Clyman, made an epic journey by car through the agricultural heartland of the Soviet Union. She had been enlisted as a guide and interpreter for two young women from Atlanta, Georgia who were seeking adventure and a first-hand look at what they naively believed was an exciting experiment in the creation of a new civilization. Their more than 2,700 km road trip took them from Moscow through Eastern Ukraine, the Donbas and the Kuban region, all the way to Tbilisi, Georgia, where Clyman was abruptly arrested by the Soviet secret police and given twenty-four hours to leave the country for allegedly spreading "false news" about the Soviet Union. Rhea's expulsion on the order of the Politburo, the first by Soviet authorities of a Western journalist in eleven years, was reported in scores of newspapers across North America, Europe and around the world. She subsequently wrote a detailed account of what she described as the "Famine-Lands" that she drove through, several early drafts of which were initially published in London's *Daily Express* newspaper before appearing in twenty-one feature articles run in the *Toronto Telegram* from 8 May to 9 June 1933. Her dramatically written reports provide a vivid eyewitness chronicle of the Great Famine, or Holodomor, when it was only beginning to exact its terrible toll on millions of citizens of Communist Ukraine. As remarkable as Rhea's achievements were during her four years in "Red Russia," her life afterwards was no less impressive for what she witnessed and accomplished despite the many challenges that she faced as a physically handicapped woman, born into a poor immigrant Jewish family, who repeatedly stared down adversity with unflinching courage, audacity, and steely determination.

Keywords: Holodomor, Great Famine, Canadian journalists, Rhea Clyman

On 20 September 1932, a Toronto daily newspaper, *The Evening Telegram*, devoted its front-page banner headline to a lead story announcing that its Moscow-based correspondent, Rhea Clyman, had been "Driven from Russia" and attacked as a "Bourgeois Troublemaker." News of her expulsion was carried on the same day in other newspapers across Canada, including the *Windsor Border Cities Star*, the *Winnipeg Tribune*, the *Brandon Daily Sun*, the *Medicine Hat News*, the *Edmonton Bulletin* and the *Vancouver*

Sun; and in the following days and weeks in Toronto's *Globe*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the *Montreal Gazette* and Ottawa's *Evening Citizen*.

In a formal decree issued as a "Resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (b) about the expulsion from the USSR of a foreign journalist," dated 17 September 1932, it had been stated:

The correspondent of the "Daily Express" Clyman is to be expelled from the USSR within two days' time for having in a manifest way defamously and provocatively, deliberately concocted information about the USSR (an article about the "nationalization of women" in a Canadian journal, an article about "uprisings and hunger rebellions" in the USSR in the "Daily Express"), having in mind as her goal the malicious discrediting of the USSR in the eyes of public opinion.

To be published as appropriate with the announcement.¹

That the decree was handed down by the Politburo indicates the seriousness with which the decision was reached. Additional details about the reasons behind the Kremlin's deportation of Clyman were provided three days later in an *Izvestiia* editorial written by L. Moskvin. Titled "Of Liars and Provocateurs from the Bourgeois Camp," it lashed out at Clyman for a host of alleged journalistic transgressions, specifically citing articles that had appeared in London's *Daily Express* newspaper in late August and early September,

¹ Translated from Russian by Jars Balan, Document No. 248, in *Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini: Dokumenty i materialy* (Kyiv: Vydavnychi dim "Kyivo-Mohylians'ka akademiia," 2007), 325. The reference to women being "nationalized," which obviously stuck in the craw of Kremlin officials, stems from comments she made in a May 1932 *Maclean's* magazine article, "Is Russia Going Capitalist?" (page 45.) In speaking about the situation in the Muslim areas of the Soviet Union, Rhea stated the following: "A source of constant irritation is the inflation of Soviet currency. In the early years of the revolution, when the Bolsheviks were fighting for their lives and struggling for their ideals, there was no currency... When the Soviet Government first introduced a system of money, no one thought it would last. Gold and silver, diamonds and pearls had ceased to have any value. The famine [i.e., of 1922-23] had taught the Russian people that only such things as could be readily exchanged for bread and meat counted.

This, no doubt, is the origin of the nationalization of women. Although the communists now hotly deny it, there is no doubt that in some remote Caucasian and Tartar villages it actually took place. When the decree for the confiscation of private wealth made its way into those remote parts, it was interpreted as an order to socialize their neighbors' wives and daughters. Wealth to those people meant the number of women you could have, and to them, women were the only thing worth nationalizing. There is a standardized currency now for the whole of the Soviet Union, but its buying power is so debased that it has ceased to have any real value except to the privileged classes."

The *Express* article concerning "uprisings and hunger rebellions" most likely refers to a story credited to "Daily Express Correspondent," though not Rhea specifically, published on 9 September 1932 under the heading "Red Troops Fire on Starving Mob."

among them several stories by Rhea describing a trip that she had made that summer to the Soviet far north.² After castigating Western reports that were critical of the Soviet Union and characterizing them as politically motivated "lies," "fables" and "fakes," the editorial zeroed in on Clyman, falsely stating that she had only been in Moscow for "a couple of months," even though government officials would have been well aware that she had been residing in the city since the end of 1928. However, Moskvin did acknowledge that Rhea had "indeed visited Kem," a remote northern town that was off-limits to foreigners because it was the transit point to the notorious Solovetsky Island prison. His editorial further suggested that she was motivated to denigrate the achievements of Soviet society so as to ingratiate herself with Lord Beaverbrook, the "titled owner" of the *Express*—a conservative tabloid *Izvestiia* accused of feeding its readers with "a daily dose of some smelly anti-Soviet dish." The lengthy and vitriolic attack on Clyman's credibility played on the fact that the *Express* was known for its gossipy celebrity coverage. Moskvin also claimed that the paper was serving the interests of Canadian Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, who at the time was seeking to thwart Soviet trade in timber with Great Britain so as to secure the British market for Canadian products.

Although Clyman was identified by *Izvestiia* and in numerous reports as a correspondent with the *Daily Express*, technically she was simply a "stringer" or freelancer who contributed articles to the mass circulation daily, along with other periodicals interested in taking them. Nevertheless, the *Express* carried the news about Clyman's abruptly terminated stay in the Soviet Union on its front page the day after *Izvestiia* revealed that she was being ordered out of the country. The account, which indicated that she had been given twenty-four hours to leave after being apprehended by the secret police in Tiflis (Tbilisi), Georgia, provided the following details concerning her eviction:

The Russian Government has ordered the deportation of Miss Rhea Clyman, a Canadian journalist, who has been in Russia for the last four years, for what are termed "lying and provocative" articles.

² "O Izhetsakh i provokatorakh iz lageria burzhuazii," *Izvestiia*, 20 September 1932, 2. *Izvestiia*, whose full name translates as *Reports of Soviets of Peoples' Deputies of the USSR*, was the paper of government record in the Soviet Union. I am grateful to Anastasia Chumak for her English translation of the editorial, which was also translated into English and published as "Provocateurs and Liars: The Decline of the Flunkey Chorus," in *Moscow Daily News*, 26 September 1932, 2, 4, concluding in the next issue of the paper under the heading, "Miserable Failure of a New Anti-Soviet Trick," 27 September 1932, 2.

Her deportation will mark the first expulsion of a foreign correspondent from Russia in ten years and the first *expulsion* of a foreign correspondent since Herr Paul Scheffer, of the "Berliner Tagesblatt," was excluded in 1922.³

Also mentioned was the fact that the editorial had devoted "half a page ... to an attack on Miss Clyman's articles ... describing a convict colony at Kem, on the White Sea."

Reports about Rhea's arrest and deportation appeared in a variety of European newspapers, among them *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), *Amersfortsh Daglad de Emlander* (Netherlands), *Die Rote Fahne* and *Arbeiter Zeitung* (Vienna), and *Gazeta Lwowska* (Lviv). An account was also carried in an 18 November 1932 issue of *M.T.I* (Magyar Távirati Iroda), a telegraphed newsletter of a Hungarian News Agency. Other newspapers as far afield as Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand similarly informed their readers about the Canadian journalist deemed such a threat that she had to be ordered out of Red Russia.

But Clyman's banishment from the U.S.S.R. received especially wide coverage in the American press, versions of wire service reports appearing in more than a hundred editions of U.S. newspapers, large and small, between 20 September and 16 October. These ranged from major dailies like the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Fresno Bee* to dozens of papers across the Midwest, Northern, and Southern states. *Svoboda*, the leading Ukrainian-language daily out of Jersey City, New Jersey, also had a short item about Rhea being forced out of the country by the "Bolsheviks," in a column in which the lead story was that Soviet government officials were acknowledging in conversations with newspapermen that the harvest in Ukraine was "worse than usual."⁴

Clearly, the arrest and deportation of a hitherto little-known Toronto woman in Communist Russia created an international sensation, though the articles that had gotten her into trouble with the Soviet government were not similarly reprinted and only reached a very limited audience. Toronto's *Telegram* gave her accounts from the Soviet Union their widest publicity, printing forty-four feature-length articles by her in two series between September 1932 and June 1933. A couple of her stories were reproduced in two Western

³ "Moscow to Deport Woman Journalist: G.P.U. Orders to Miss Rhea Clyman," *Daily Express*, 20 September 1932, 1. Significantly, the *Express* made a point of stating that Rhea was not their correspondent, but merely a contributor, no doubt distancing her relationship with the paper so as to be able to keep open the option of despatching an "official" correspondent to the Soviet Union in the future.

⁴ *Svoboda*, 22 September 1932, 1.

Canadian newspapers, but by and large her powerfully written and detailed reports got almost no attention beyond the *Telegram's* readership in the Greater Toronto area.

So who was this woman who so infuriated Stalin and his inner circle that the Politburo felt compelled to make her the first foreign correspondent to be expelled from the country in ten years?

Rhea Clyman was born Rachel Gertrude Clyman on 4 July 1904. Although described as a native of Toronto in various sources, her real birthplace was the town of Połaniec, in southeast Poland.⁵ She came to Canada as a two-year-old with her parents, Szulim (Solomon) and Anna (née Goldblum), along with two older siblings, David and Yankel (Jack), in 1906, settling in a poor immigrant neighbourhood just north of Toronto's city center.⁶ At the age of six she was seriously injured in an accident involving a streetcar, losing the lower part of her left leg and necessitating repeated hospital stays over the course of seven years. As she related in a 1939 profile about her published in the *Globe and Mail*:

While a patient in the Hospital for Sick Children, she came under the influence of the late John Ross Robertson, editor and founder of The Evening Telegram, and godfather of the hospital.

"He used to take a great interest in the patients," she explained. "He came to me one day and said 'Young lady, what are you going to be when you grow up?' and I said I was going to be a journalist. I stuck to it, that's all."⁷

However, Rhea's path to a journalistic career was not an easy or straightforward one, as besides the poverty of her family and her physical disability, she also faced serious

⁵ Połaniec is in Staszów County, Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. Its population in 2012 was 8,406, whereas circa 1870 it had around 2,000 inhabitants. Historically it was home to a large Jewish community, which was destroyed during the Holocaust. Since Połaniec was part of the Russian Empire prior to the First World War, it is likely that Rhea's parents spoke some Russian, which she might have heard in addition to Polish as a small child. Rhea herself was the source of the inaccurate claim that she had been born in Toronto, falsely reporting that she was a Toronto native on one of her border crossings into the United States, no doubt to expedite her processing by customs and immigration officials. She also appears to have misrepresented a couple of other small facts in her biography, for reasons that can only be surmised.

⁶ I am indebted to Carolynne Veffler of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Toronto for obtaining the details concerning Rhea's Polish origins and family history. She was able to establish the connection to Połaniec with information gleaned from <http://jri-poland.org/jriplweb.htm>. The latter indicates that a Szulim Klajman was born in Połaniec in 1869. The family name was initially written Kleiman upon landing, a spelling that was retained by Rhea's oldest brother, David, according to his 1970 obituary. Canadian records give 1873 as the birthdate for Rhea's mother, Anna (Chaia).

⁷ See "Left Toronto to Write History as It Happened," *Globe and Mail*, 27 May 1939, 15.

challenges obtaining an education. Her situation was greatly complicated when her father, Solomon, passed away when Rhea was eleven years old, leaving her mother Anna with the difficult task of trying to provide for the family, which had grown to three boys and two girls.⁸

Consequently, Rhea took a factory job and was forced by circumstances to round out her abruptly curtailed primary school education with self-study, which she later supplemented by taking night school courses and business classes. She even managed to attend lectures at the University of Toronto, though she never completed a degree and may simply have been enrolled as an auditor.

Seriously interested in writing from her “tween” years, she moved to New York in 1926, where she initially worked for a psychoanalyst. A year later she set sail for London, where she obtained a position as a publicist working for the Agent General for the Province of Alberta. However, feeling that she was getting too comfortable living in England, she soon decided, against the advice of her English friends and her employer, to move to Paris, hoping for an opening in journalism. While there, she studied French at a university and supported herself by teaching English in return.

In September 1928, when her French student visa expired, instead of going back to London, she moved on to Berlin, where she acquired a “smattering” of German as she observed firsthand the failure of Hitler’s first bid for power, believing this to be good preparation for the career that she aspired to in journalism. It was while she was in Germany that she learned that the Soviet visa that she had applied for in Britain had finally been approved. It undoubtedly helped that by then Rhea had friends in the British Communist Party, which she had likely joined as a member, as intelligence records suggest she had served as a courier for the movement.

Once again demonstrating her pluck and determination, on 23 December 1928 the twenty-four year-old Clyman left by train for Moscow with just fifteen pounds sterling in her pocket and a firm resolve to become a foreign correspondent.⁹ Disembarking without even having arranged a place to stay, much less a job, she had the good fortune of being taken under wing by a sympathetic stranger that she met at the train station and who

she described as having a vocabulary of about three words in English and German. The stranger delivered her to the nearby Grand Hotel, where she was handed over to the care of Mrs. Negley Farson, whose husband was a correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*. After spending the night sleeping in their bathtub, the following day she found a place to live thanks to the Society of Friends (i.e., Quakers), and several days later was hired by the already famous—and later infamous—*New York Times* correspondent, Walter Duranty, to serve as his secretary and assistant. Duranty acted as her journalistic mentor while she dedicated herself to learning Russian, and nine months later she was ready to set out on her own, selling stories to the *London Daily Express*, owned by the Canadian-born press baron, Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken). In Canada her reports were carried in the *Toronto Evening Telegram*, and were also occasionally picked up by other publications, but her biggest audience was with the *Daily Express*, which had a large and growing readership in Britain.

The modest income that she earned as a freelancer made it possible for Rhea to support herself in Moscow, and as a foreigner paid in Western currency she could purchase hard-to-obtain goods from special stores that were inaccessible to most Soviet citizens. Either to keep her living costs low, or to experience firsthand the conditions in which ordinary working people lived in a revolutionary “workers’ state,” Rhea rented a sixteen square-foot room in a crowded communal flat occupied by a multi-generational Russian family. She shared a bathroom and kitchen with more than a dozen people, including a grandmother, a police officer, and nine children. It gave her a unique perspective on Soviet society, which contrasted sharply with that of visiting journalists who stayed in hotels and travelled on expense accounts, or resident correspondents who were on the payroll of major news organizations.

Nevertheless, like many of the reporters who were sent on whirlwind “fact-finding tours” of the Soviet Union, or obtained coveted bureau assignments to Moscow, Clyman was initially sympathetically disposed to the prosperous and egalitarian society that the Bolsheviks were promising to create as Stalin embarked on the First Five-Year Plan. Even the hardships and inconveniences that journalists sometimes had to contend with—which paled in comparison to what the overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens had to endure

⁸ Besides David and Jack, her other siblings in birth order were Rose, Murray, and Sara. In the 1921 Canadian Census Rhea’s name is spelled Rae, and her age was given as 18. In Yiddish her name was probably rendered as Ruchla.

⁹ As Rhea later recollected, “It was difficult to get into Russia... I had applied through Canada House in England. When I reached Berlin I was down to my last \$75. I called at the Soviet Embassy there and they

said they had been looking for me to give me a visa.” See “Telegram Writer Ousted in 1932 by Russians,” *The Telegram*, 12 November 1969, 61. At the time, \$75 USD was equivalent to approximately 15£, the currency she would have been carrying.

on a daily basis—could be excused on the grounds that Russia was in the throes of a momentous transformation from an impoverished and oppressive Tsarist backwater to a bright and modern socialist utopia. However, over time, Rhea's enthusiasm for the great Soviet experiment waned as she began to fully comprehend the scale of the arbitrary and insidious nature of the institutionalized terror that the Communist dictatorship rested on, and the bureaucratic incompetence that characterized the implementation of so much of central planning. Her disillusionment does not appear to have come as a sudden awakening, but to have developed gradually as a result of numerous experiences and her growing insight into the systemic failure of Communist ideology as imposed from above by the Bolsheviks. Furthermore, her deepening disenchantment was never fully expressed in her writings until the months immediately preceding and following her 1932 expulsion, by which time she could no longer hold back her true feelings about what she was witnessing. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Rhea fully understood that if her articles were too critical they wouldn't pass the censorship of the Soviet press bureau and could jeopardize her ability to stay in Russia, which ultimately proved to be the case. Furthermore, Rhea was not really interested in leaving the Soviet Union at a time when what was happening there was of tremendous international interest and the air was charged with the fervor whipped up by the Five-Year Plan.

In the meantime, Rhea skillfully honed her reportorial skills and established her journalistic credentials, though as a freelancer and a woman she remained on the margins of the male-dominated foreign press corps in Moscow. She pursued and cultivated contacts among leading Soviet officials, meeting with such celebrated figures as the author, diplomat, and feminist activist, Alexandra Kollontai and Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya. She was once driven home after a function at the Kremlin by none other than Prime Minister Mikhail Kalinin, and interacted with other prominent Bolsheviks in the shrinking circle around Stalin. She also maintained regular contact with the staff at the British Embassy in Moscow, and made an especially favorable impression on William Reader Bullard (1885–1976), the British consul in Leningrad, who went on to have a distinguished career as a diplomat for which he was later knighted.

That by 1931 Rhea had achieved a degree of recognition in Moscow's foreign colony is illustrated by the fact, that when George Bernard Shaw made his high-profile visit to the Soviet Union, he quickly attached her to his entourage because he found her both attractive and interesting company. Indeed, Rhea conspired with Shaw to serve as an unauthorized

guide, as she related in the following account:

The Shaw visit lasted ten days, and I was with Mr. Shaw most of the time. He liked having me around; even at 76, which he was then, he had an eye for the ladies. Also as I had been in Russia for three years and learned the language, he wanted to hear all I could tell him about actual conditions....

Mr. Shaw did not like banquets, but he did like visiting churches. Professor Lunacharsky and Constantine Umansky, later ambassador to Mexico, who were attached to the Astor-Shaw party as guides and interpreters, did their utmost to prevent this by arranging a full day's round of visits. However, with the aid of George Walker, British Embassy's first secretary, we managed to contrive it; between the hours of five and seven in the afternoon, when Mr. Shaw was supposed to be resting, Walker would come into the hotel and take Lunacharsky or Umansky, whoever happened to be on duty, off for a drink in the bar, and I would slip upstairs and get Mr. Shaw out the back way, and we would go off on a round of churches. It gave Mr. Shaw great satisfaction, I remember, to discover that, despite the anti-godless campaign which was then going strong, the churches were still well patronized.¹⁰

Rhea's remarks were written in response to a letter that sharply disputed a short article that she had published in a journal, *The American Mercury*, which anecdotally described an exchange between Stalin and Shaw when they met near the end of the latter's Soviet visit.¹¹ She insisted her report was accurate because it was related to her personally by Shaw, who gave her a detailed summary of his conversation with Stalin, which was interpreted by Lunacharsky. According to William Bullard, Rhea interviewed Shaw at some length during his stay in the Soviet Union, though there is no evidence that she ever managed to get her interview published.

It was through her connection with George Bernard Shaw that Rhea subsequently met his fellow Fabian Socialists, Lord and Lady (Baroness) Passfield, more commonly known as Beatrice and Sydney Webb. They too, were planning a trip to the Soviet Union, with the

¹⁰ "The Open Forum," *The American Mercury* vol. LX, no. 257 (May 1945): 634. Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) was a Poltava-born author, essayist and journalist who served as the Commissar of Culture and Education in the first Soviet government until being dismissed by Stalin in 1929. Fluent in English, he represented the Soviet Union at the League of Nations from 1930 to 1932. Konstantin Umansky (1902–1945) was a Soviet editor, journalist, artist and diplomat. A native of Mykolaiv, from 1931 to 1936 he worked in the Press and Information Department of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, which he eventually headed. In 1939 he was appointed Soviet Ambassador to the United States.

¹¹ Rhea G. Clyman, "Stalin Outwits Shaw," *The American Mercury* vol. LX, no. 254 (February 1945): 220.

goal of writing a book that would highlight its achievements. Introduced by Shaw, Rhea got together with them while on a visit to London in April 1932, an encounter that Beatrice recorded for posterity in her diary. Of particular interest in her entry are the following remarks, which clearly indicate Rhea no longer had any illusions about the Soviet Union, and was already aware of the famine conditions in Ukraine:

She says she reads and speaks Russian fluently. She is physically attractive, would be pretty if her expression were not odious — distinctly a “man’s woman,” very free and easy and indiscreet — neither Sidney nor I liked her — though our suspicions as to her “virtue” may be wrong — or at least may be exaggerated. But she is a common little thing, with no intellectual background and no moral scruples, and the last word of cynicism; she winks sly suspicion, snarls and sneers at persons and causes. Anarchist by temperament, she started on her wanderings with a bias towards Communism — because it stood for atheism and rebellion against accepted codes of conduct. Now she loathes Russian Communism and all its works, and spent her time trying to “disabuse” us; one perpetual flow of accusation and insinuations against everyone concerned. I asked her whether she thought it would, in spite of its failure, continue to exist. “Oh, yes, there is no force to destroy it except of course War. It would not survive a Great War.” And why do you dislike the Soviet system — what do you think it will turn into? “It will be an inferior America,” she said sharply; “mass production of a common man; no refinement or variety or personal liberty — just the common man repeating what he has learnt to say.” Her objections to the present state of things, are: that the people are virtually starving, that no intellectual worker is secure, that men and women are bound to their place of work, that they are compelled to work overtime at other jobs — nominally voluntarily but really to save their livelihood; that the housing is a scandal, that the grandiose industrial scheme — Dnieprostroy — etc, [*sic*] are white elephants, that machines are destroyed, that the Collective farms are a dead failure and there is famine in the Ukraine and the Crimea.¹²

What is striking about the Webb’s comments throughout the entire entry is how patronizing she is toward Rhea, unconsciously revealing her class snobbery notwithstanding her

¹² By the spring of 1932 famine had broken out in parts of Ukraine (though not in Crimea), which Rhea probably heard about from her extensive network of contacts and which was already being reported in the Western press. See *Beatrice Webb’s Typescript Diary*, 9 April 1932 (page 73) <http://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:nut827hel/read/single#page/72/mode/2up>

socialist politics and her request that people not refer to her as Baroness Passfield, but as Mrs. Webb. What is equally clear, is that by the spring of 1932 Rhea was totally fed up with the lies and empty promises of Soviet propaganda, and that the Webbs were not in the least bit interested in hearing anything critical about how communism was developing in Russia. The Webbs eventually travelled to the Soviet Union from 21 May to late July of 1932, using their trip as the basis for producing a highly influential and laudatory 1,000-page account titled *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?*, originally published in 1935 and twice reprinted, the third edition appearing in 1941. It would not be the only time that Rhea’s informed and candid opinions about the Soviet Union would be dismissed not just by people on the Left, like the Webbs, but by many liberals who wanted to believe that the grass was greener in Red Russia than it was in the capitalist West, particularly during the Great Depression.

That it was becoming ever more difficult for Rhea to restrain herself when speaking about the Soviet Union is evident in two feature articles that she published in Canada’s *Maclean’s* magazine in May and June of 1932. In the first, provocatively titled “Is Russia Going Capitalist?,” she essentially argued that the revolution had run out of steam, and that the Bolshevik leadership had become an ossified elite that refused to recognize the failure of so many of their ideologically-driven policies.¹³ The second article, “Russia’s New Woman,” was devoted to describing the situation of women in Soviet society, who in some respects had achieved a notable degree of equality—meaning they could hold factory jobs, do hard manual labor, and earned equal wages for the same work—but at the same time were often treated badly by men and were expected to conform to traditional roles in what largely remained a patriarchal society. In the latter piece, Rhea gives credit to some of the legal gains made by women and acknowledges that there were signs of a few positive changes taking place in that it was finally becoming permissible for women to express their feminine natures in the way they dressed and made themselves up. While her frank portrayal of the challenges that women still had to routinely contend with must have struck a responsive chord with many of the women readers of *Maclean’s*, at the same time her criticisms undoubtedly irritated “old school” males on the Left, especially Comintern officials concerned about the way that the Soviet Union was being depicted in Western media. “Russia’s New Woman” is significant because it reflects Rhea’s strong feminist views, which she often revealed in her journalistic work by making a point of writing

¹³ Rhea G. Clyman, “Is Russia Going Capitalist?” *Maclean’s*, 15 May 1932, 11, 44–6.

about the difficult lives that the overwhelming majority of women still led in an ostensibly socialist state where gender differences were supposed to have been overcome.¹⁴

Rhea's increasingly critical attitude toward the Soviet Government did not go unnoticed by Communist authorities in Moscow, who were becoming highly sensitive about the image of the Soviet Union abroad and were certainly alerted about her stories in *Maclean's*. At the same time, she was probably being closely monitored by the Soviet secret police through their extensive network of domestic spies, which might well have extended into the flat where she lived. One can be fairly confident that any unflattering comments that she in all likelihood made in private conversations about the differences between Soviet rhetoric and reality would have been reported to the appropriate officials, and that the censor's office was made aware that what she was writing merited close scrutiny because it was shedding uncomfortable light on the shortcomings of the regime.

A major turning point in her career reporting from the Soviet Union took place in June 1932, when Rhea made a four-week trip by train and boat, from Leningrad to the northern coastal cities of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, to investigate conditions there, and specifically to determine if political prisoners and exiles were being used as slave labor. The impetus for her trip may also have been partly personal, as she apparently once had a Russian boyfriend who had been sentenced to three years in a labor camp in Siberia for illegally trading rubles.¹⁵ It could be that Rhea also wanted to see for herself what regular prison facilities were like, since it was claimed that the Soviet regime took a progressive approach in dealing with common criminals, who were treated reasonably well and subject to political re-education and vocational training while serving out their sentences. Regardless, the same was not true for the legions of political prisoners and "kulak" exiles who were ruthlessly abused and exploited to develop the Soviet hinterland—many of them dying of exposure, exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease as they struggled to survive in horrific circumstances. Officially travelling under the auspices of a government timber trust, Rhea embarked on a physically demanding journey that took her from isolated lumber camps in the forests of Karelia and remote mines in the Apatite Mountains, all the way to the Arctic Ocean.

¹⁴ Rhea Clyman, "Russia's New Woman," *Maclean's*, 15 June 1932, 22, 38, 54. Of course, women also benefited from the literacy campaigns and educational policies of the government, as well as the progressive treatment of divorce and child custody issues, greater sexual freedom (at least for radical feminists), and access to birth control, including abortions.

¹⁵ As was revealed in the introduction to her first article about her stay in Kem: "A Russian, her former

It was a series of five articles that Rhea wrote about an unauthorized visit that she made to the White Sea port town of Kem (which was closed to foreigners) that was responsible for incurring the wrath of Soviet officials, especially since she managed to get her stories out of the country without having them vetted by the censors. Published under her name in the *Daily Express* between 29 August and 2 September, the stories captured the grim mood of the town where thousands of political prisoners were routinely being dispatched to work in the surrounding forests even though Rhea had been told no timber was being harvested in the region.¹⁶ Aggravating matters was the fact that her reports appeared at a time when the Kremlin was vigorously denying that the timber it was exporting to Great Britain was being processed by slave labor, enabling the Kremlin to significantly undercut the price of lumber that the English had previously imported from Canada.

Upon returning to Leningrad from Arkhangelsk, Rhea was questioned about what she had seen by the British consul William Bullard, who provided a detailed summary of her remarks in his diary entry for 31 July 1932 and which he expanded on in his 6 August report to his superiors in the British Foreign Office. That he found her to be a credible witness is evident in this flattering assessment of her:

Miss Clyman's visit to the north has confirmed my opinion that a private person who speaks Russian and knows something about the country can get ten times as much information here as an official—a foreign woman better than a man.¹⁷

Bullard goes on to provide further information about her trip which shows that she had a nuanced view of the Soviet system, despite her growing disillusionment with it. For instance, in her comments about the colonies established by "...American and Canadian Finns who had been recruited on three-year contracts by the Finnish section of the Communist Party," she reported that on the whole they seemed to be "content" despite living "pretty isolated lives," as they had access to food through Torgsin shops.¹⁸

sweetheart, was sent to Siberia three years ago for illegal trading in rubles." See "Town of Living Corpses Turns Out to See Drama When Exiles Meet Wives," *Regina Leader Post*, 8 October 1932, 1.

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Rhea was credited as the author of the series, which was promoted as "The Russia Nobody Knows," whereas her earlier contributions appeared without a personal byline, but under the generic attribution as the Moscow Correspondent of the *Daily Express*.

¹⁷ Julian and Margaret Bullard, eds., *Inside Stalin's Russia: The Diaries of Reader Bullard, 1930-1934*, Foreword by Douglas Hurd (Day Books; Orchard Piece, Crawborough, Charlbury, Oxfordshire, 2000), 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124. Torgsin stores only sold goods in foreign currencies.

Bullard at the same time confirms that Clyman was primarily intent on investigating "... the stories of forced labour denied by [Vyacheslav] Molotov."¹⁹ Of particular interest were the observations that she shared with him concerning the vast army of prisoners digging the White Sea canal:

Miss Clyman saw thousands of men *and women* working on the canal, from Sigyeza northwards. She recognized Russians, Kirghiz, Tartars and Uzbeks. At first she thought they were troops as they wore a sort of uniform, but an OGPU courier on the train bragged about their having set the 'class enemy' to honest work, and said that there were 200,000 of them working on the canal. 'Look at them,' the courier said. 'No chance of sabotage now. With the exception of the chief engineer they are all prisoners.'²⁰

She further elaborated on the exile of "... [m]any thousands of kulaks ... to the north since the collectivization of agriculture began." According to her, of the 35,000 inhabitants of Hibinogorsk alone, 32,000 were believed to be "... *kulaks*, mostly from the Ukraine and the Nizhni-Novgorod area." Describing how they worked in generally appalling conditions and were quartered "... twenty or thirty families to a tent or three-ply wooden hut lined with tar paper ... [s]he was told that during the first months after their arrival many hundreds died of exposure, typhus and smallpox."²¹

In her own published account of her trip to the Far North, which the *Toronto Telegram* ran after Rhea's expulsion in twenty-two installments between 22 September and 17 October 1932, she specifically mentioned encountering Ukrainians in the mountains of Hibinogorsk. Some had come there voluntarily because there was work in the apatite mining industry, which had been originally developed using the labor of exiles. While there, Rhea had this interesting exchange with "a tall blonde youth" who explained why he had come to this distant corner of the Soviet north:

"Have you been in Hibinogorsk [*sic*] long?" I asked him.

"No, I came from the Ukraine two months ago."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124. An old Bolshevik, at the time Molotov (1890–1986) was serving as the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, effectively the Premier of the Soviet Union and the second most powerful politician after Stalin.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125. Hibinogorsk (spelled by Rhea with an "a") is now known as Kirovsk, Murmansk region.

"Voluntarily?"

"Yes, we have nothing to eat there. My people were sent here two years ago, and they wrote me that there was work and plenty to eat, so I came."

That, I thought, explains the migration of peasants. It is the trek for food.²²

Concerns about food, typically the lack of it, and frequently the poor quality as well, ran like a theme throughout Rhea's articles about the Far North. On occasion she herself went hungry because there was little or nothing to eat. Even in a city of 40,000, like Petrozavodsk, the hotel dining room could only offer her hot water on her arrival, and the cooperative stores in town only seemed to have cereal coffee in stock.²³ Although food shortages were obviously common throughout much of the Soviet Union at this time, it is clear that Rhea was also aware that they were especially acute in Ukraine.

Her northern odyssey was remarkable in many ways, not the least of which was its daunting length. In total she travelled 1,000 miles by train all the way to Murmansk and then took a steamer to Arkhangelsk, before returning by rail to Leningrad and Moscow. But as difficult as the trip to the Arctic was, just weeks later she embarked on an even more arduous adventure—one that took her by car on mostly crude roads and wagon tracks from the Soviet capital through eastern Ukraine and the mountains of the north Caucasus as far as Tbilisi, Georgia. The distance that she covered by road with two female companions was roughly 1,700 miles, after which she travelled back again to Moscow by train, this time accompanied by a police escort.²⁴

Rhea made the trip as the guide and interpreter for two twenty-two year-old Atlanta women, Alva Christensen and Mary de Give, described in some reports as "society girls." They had managed to make it to Moscow with a car they had used to first explore Western

²² Rhea Clyman, "Housed in Sea of Mud Miners of New Klondike Enrich Soviet and Die," *Evening Telegram*, 11 October 1932, 1, 2. The subheading used for the piece was "Dispossessed Kulaks Plentiful Fodder for 'Green Gold' Eldorado of Arctic." The same article was reprinted under the heading "Miners of New Klondike Enrich Soviet and Die," in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 2 November 1932, 6.

²³ Rhea G. Clyman, "Food? That's Difficult Will Fix It Tomorrow Cheery Soviet Welcome / Stores Sell Little But Coffee, Northern Town is Battleground of Many Smells," *Evening Telegram*, 23 September 1932, 1, 3. Equally telling is the heading of another article in the series: "Radio's Blare of Food Available in 5 Years Mocks Hungry Writer / Stale Crust, Half Egg, Sole Sustenance for 36-Hour Train Journey Through North," *Evening Telegram*, 13 October 1932, front page of section 2.

²⁴ Although the headings for her articles proclaimed that the journey was 5,000 miles long, and there is no doubt that many of the tracks being followed wandered throughout the countryside following the contours of the landscape, the figure of 5,000 was probably an estimate and a bit of an exaggeration. Nonetheless, it was a huge distance to traverse in an automobile.

Europe, before going to Russia with plans to drive to the Central Asian republics. Much like Rhea when she had first arrived in 1928, Christensen and de Give were keen to see the brave new world being created under Communism. Turning down the interpreters and guides that Soviet authorities wanted to provide them with, on the grounds that they would undoubtedly be agents for the secret police, they recruited Rhea to accompany them as by then she was an experienced Soviet hand and was skilled in navigating Soviet bureaucracy. Christensen would later write that they had "made an unwise choice," as it soon became clear that there was a fundamental clash of wills and personalities between Rhea and her naïve but equally headstrong charges.²⁵ Nevertheless, the women were united in their determination to go, despite warnings that Rhea received from several different sources:

The Press Department at the Soviet Foreign Office did everything to dissuade me from going, but I held firm. Short of forbidding it absolutely, there was nothing they could do.

"You'll be back in Moscow within a week," Neuman, the night censor, lisped. "There are no roads. You won't get any gasoline, and there are no hotels on the route you are following. You can't live without your hot bath and three meals a day. You'll come running back to Moscow when you feel the first bedbug bite."

...

The night before starting our embassy rang up. They thought that this trip was a foolhardy venture, the roads would be dangerous after the autumn rains. I would get no gasoline. Our Ambassador, Sir Esmond Ovey, had attempted a short trip by motor but he had to turn back when he ran out of fuel. Then Walter Duranty, of the New York Times, added another warning. He came up to say good-bye and told me that he had my obituary, all written—he promised that it was a good one.²⁶

²⁵ See Alva Christensen, "Girls Find-Filth and Famine on Leaving Moscow," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 January 1933, 8. Christensen managed to get her parallel account of the road trip from Moscow to Georgia published in the *Tribune* as part of an eight-article series between 15–24 January 1933, before Rhea's much lengthier and more detailed chronicle was published in the *Telegram*. The only other mention that Christensen makes of Clyman is in her brief description of Rhea's arrest, which includes her comment, "It seemed very stupid that it had taken the G.P.U. five months to ... to decide to expel her from the country, but we did not blame them, as she was quite unpleasant." "U.S. Girls Find Russians Work at Point of Gun," *Chicago Tribune*, 4. For her part, Rhea doesn't even mention Christensen and de Give by name in any of her articles, and only once refers to having American travelling companions, indicating the depth of her feelings of animosity towards them.

²⁶ Rhea G. Clyman, "Dares Warning of Death to Discover Grim Secret of Russia's Famine-Land," *Toronto Evening Telegram*, 10 May 1933, 1–2. In 1933 the Kremlin did issue a ban on foreigners travelling to famine-affected regions when the widespread starvation was impossible to conceal.

Rhea was certainly aware of the challenges that lay ahead, but she was committed to learning the truth about what was happening in the countryside and the republics, and to finding out how ordinary Soviet workers and peasants were faring after fifteen years of Communist rule.

The last figures published by the Soviet Government stated that all this territory is now 90 per cent collectivized. But when I left Moscow, I knew there was famine raging there. Stalin's policy had failed, the socialization of agriculture was a failure. Wild rumors were going the rounds of Moscow Government circles; a peasant uprising in the Don Cossack regions, grain collections were being made at the point of a gun, and there were whispers about even cannibalism and famine atrocities.²⁷

Loading the car up with as many provisions as they could pack onto it, including blankets, bedding, tools, extra tires, cooking and washing utensils, bread and other food items, as well as additional gasoline tanks, they departed from Moscow and headed south through Tula, Orel, Kursk, and Belgorod.

It was in Kharkiv that Rhea first reported seeing signs of the hunger in Ukraine, having earlier found food supplies to be limited, but at least available in the Russian communities that she passed through en route. Especially noteworthy was a memorable encounter that she unexpectedly had with a fellow Torontonian shortly before leaving the city:

We had been two days in Kharkov [*sic*], but we were all anxious to get away. The great Ukrainian capital was in the grip of hunger. Beggars swarmed round the streets, the stores were empty, the workers' bread rations had just been cut from two pounds a day per person to one pound and a quarter. A young Ukrainian girl, Alice Mertzka, had come begging to our hotel for food. She had lived in New Toronto for nine years[,] her father worked for the Massey Harris Company. Three years ago, she and her father came back to Russia to get work at the tractor plant in Kharkov. "Now we are without bread," she told me.²⁸

Having left their hotel before breakfast was served, and unable to obtain anything to eat at the famed Kharkiv *Traktorzavod*, the women drove south on wagon roads past more than

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Rhea G. Clyman, "Girl from New Toronto Begs Bread in Russia Father Lured by 'Job'," *Evening Telegram*, 15 May 1933, 3. The Massey Harris Company produced farm machinery.

a dozen villages that were "strangely forlorn and deserted." Rhea gradually realized that the empty structures "were the homes of those thousands of expropriated peasants—the kulaks—" that she "had seen working in the mines and cutting timber in the North." Finally, they came upon a village that had promising signs of life, as some kerchiefed peasant women were selling produce from their gardens and orchards. When Rhea attempted to buy some milk and eggs, the reply that she got from one of the women surprised her:

At last I found one who could speak a little Russian. I asked her where I could get a quart of milk and ten eggs.

She eyed me curiously for a moment, then demanded: "You want them for money?"

"Of course," I answered. "I don't expect to get them for nothing."

"You don't understand," she said. "We don't sell eggs for money or milk. We want bread. Have you any?"

At first I thought she meant grain, for in Russian and Ukrainian the word is the same. But when I realized that it was plain ordinary bread she wanted, I could hardly believe my ears! In Russia the villages were forlorn, the peasants ragged and dirty, they grumbled about not having enough food, but they did not ask for bread. If they had anything to sell, they were quite content to let it go for money. Here in the Ukraine, where the peasants seemed so clean and everything well-kept, they wanted bread!

The woman explained that in this village no one had any eggs or milk to sell; the cows and chickens had been slaughtered long ago. They were all starving in the spring. If I drove back with her two miles, into her own village, she would try and find me some. Would four be enough? Then she could manage. She got in beside me, and all the other peasant women left their baskets to call out words of encouragement. This was her first ride in an automobile, she told me, and this the first automobile that had ever entered their village.

All of the residents in the neighboring village came out to see the visitors, and were clearly curious as to who they were and their reason for being there.

They wanted something of me, but I could not make out what it was. At last someone went off for a little crippled lad of fourteen, and when he came hobbling up, the mystery was explained. This was the Village of Isoomka, the lad told me. I was from Moscow, yes; we were a delegation studying conditions in the Ukraine, yes. Well, they wanted me to

take a petition back to the Kremlin, from this village and the one I had just been in. "Tell the Kremlin we are starving; we have no bread!"

A tall, bearded peasant was spokesman. His two sons and the rest of the men and women nodded approval at every word. The little crippled boy stood with his right hand on his crutch, translating everything he said into Russian for me, word by word.

"We are good, hard-working peasants, loyal Soviet citizens, but the village Soviet has taken our land from us. We are in the collective farm, but we do not get any grain. Everything, land, cows and horses, have been taken from us, and we have nothing to eat. Our children were eating grass in the spring...."

So as to make themselves fully understood, and to emphasize how dire their prospects were for the future, the effects and the cause of the famine were then made demonstratively clear:

I must have looked unbelieving at this, for a tall, gaunt woman started to take the children's clothes off. She undressed them one by one, prodded their sagging bellies, pointed to their spindly legs, ran her hand up and down their tortured, mis-shapen, twisted little bodies to make me understand that this was real famine. I shut my eyes, I could not bear to look at all this horror. "Yes," the woman insisted, and the boy repeated, "they were down on all fours like animals, eating grass. There was nothing else for them."

"What have you to eat now?" I asked them, still keeping my eyes averted from those tortured bodies. "Are all the villages round here the same? Who gets the grain?"

"It is autumn now. We have the vegetables from the garden, squash and pumpkins, and a few potatoes—from that we make flour." One woman raced back into the house and brought out a black, doughy substance. "Vot nasha khleb (here is our bread)," the boy translated. "Made of dried pumpkins and potatoes. When this is gone we'll have nothing else. The grain the village Soviet takes away. Our vegetables [that] we grow in the garden will not last the winter. What shall we do in the spring?"

I left this village with the determination that their petition should not only be heard in the Kremlin, but by the rest of the world also. Stalin was building Socialism in one country, and peasant children are eating grass outside the doors of his Socialist cities. After this we understood why the village children always sprang up with stones to hurl at us as we passed. It was their revenge at something that could move faster than those spindly legs could carry them.²⁹

²⁹ Rhea G. Clyman, "Children Lived on Grass Only Food in Farm Area Grain Taken From Them / Mile After Mile of Deserted Villages in Ukrain[e] Farm Area Tells Story of Soviet Invasion," *Evening Telegram*, 16

The promise that Rhea made to tell the world about what she had seen in Isoomka was a promise that she kept, even if the world was not particularly interested in hearing about the terrible consequences that Stalin's policies were having in what before the revolution had been the celebrated breadbasket of Europe.

Other stories that made reference to the famine conditions in Ukraine followed, a map accompanying the initial instalment in the series appearing below the heading "Toronto Girl's 5,000-Mile Trip Through Famine Lands of Russia."³⁰ For instance, in Sloviansk, the only accommodations that could be had by Rhea, Alva and Mary, were at a workers' sanatorium "hidden behind a network of barbed wire" in a pine forest outside of town. They spent the night there in a room with nine women on iron bedsteads that had thin mattresses stretched over boards, and only a thin cotton sheet to cover themselves with. Other women who arrived in the night had to settle on the floor outside the door. It was difficult to sleep, and the local women were keen to know what life was like where the three foreigners had come from, and whether workers there had white bread and meat to eat. As one of the women explained, "They tell us that there's unemployment in America and everywhere. Our papers say that the workers are starving in the capitalist countries, but we have no white bread and they do." A spirited discussion ensued around the topic of food, complaints being aired that no meat had been available for seven months and even coal miners and their families had to subsist on a meager diet as co-operative stores offered few choices and limited supplies while prices on the open market were too high for most working families.

But a Polish woman who was the wife of a "high Communist official," interjected in the discussion in a dismissive way that aroused the ire of the women workers, as Rhea captured in her account of the unusually frank exchange:

"To me food is of no importance," the Polish woman asserted. "I've come here for a cure, my liver is out of order and I need the mud baths here. Food does not concern me."

This was obviously said to impress me.

"How can you get a cure without food?" another woman barked out. "That's what's wrong with all of us, not enough to eat. How can you work in the coal mines on potatoes and black bread; that's all I have to eat at home." There was a pause, then, "Where do you

May 1933, 1, 36.

³⁰"Dares Warning of Death To Discover Grim Secret of Russia's Famine Land," *op cit*.

work that food is no concern to you? Do you get Red Army rations? I know they're good. I've got a married son in the army now."

"I'm not a worker," the Polish woman answered languidly, as if annoyed that the conversation should take such a turn. "I'm a domashni khaziika (housewife). I work hard, just as hard as you women in the mines, but I'm not classed as a worker."³¹

The atmosphere then became increasingly tense until Rhea changed the subject by describing what a typical Canadian worker had to eat, and the women thought better of further provoking the wife of a Party apparatchik.

Travelling east from Ukraine past Rostov and through the north Caucasus, food, and the difficulty of getting it, was a topic addressed on several occasions in Rhea's published reports in the *Telegram*. For example, in the Kuban region, which was heavily settled by Ukrainians, she related how armed sentries kept watch over wheat fields at night, shooting any peasants who might be brave enough to try to steal a few kernels of grain from the collective farm crop to feed their families. An inadvertent witness to a nighttime raid by peasants sabotaging a wheat field, Rhea relates that she was told by one of the men not to say anything about what she saw, which he characterized as an act of retaliation: "They shot twelve people in our district here for stealing colhoze [*sic*] grain. We've organized brigades now. We'll see that the colhozes have no grain, too!"³² But Rhea also describes coming across an unexpected pocket of bounty, thanks to an agricultural settlement created by the Kremlin for Soviet Jews in the Krasnodar Krai. In a city called Armavir, she records having the following conversation with a peasant she met on a market day:

Was he a Jew? Yes, most of the peasants here were Jews. How was farming? "Bad, taxes are very high. The crop was good here, but the Government took away everything. We've enough bread to eat, we're better off than others, but we get nothing except bread for our work."

I could not tear myself away from this market. I had never seen so much food in Russia since 1930. I saw a peasant selling bread, the first we had seen on sale for three weeks. Large black loaves made of corn flour with a little wheat sold for 12 rubles (\$6) a

³¹Rhea G. Clyman, "Wife of Communist Boss Brags to Starved Women About Her Well-fed Lot," *Toronto Evening Telegram*, 17 May 1933, 1-3.

³²Rhea G. Clyman, "Bullets Chase Girls' Car When Telegram Writer Defies Soviet President / Terrifying Ride Leads to Rebels' Rendezvous — Russia-in-Asia is Grim, Perilous Land," *Evening Telegram*, 25

kilo. There were sacks of dark flour, too, going for 180 rubles a pood (48 lbs.), but with a little bargaining they could be had for 170. There were plenty of cigarettes on sale and I bought 500 at 12 rubles a hundred.³³

The sight of woman selling a “huge pile of cooked roast chickens” also drew her attention, but when she approached and saw that her face, partly concealed by a shawl, was “half ... devoured by leprosy,” she recoiled in horror and ran away.

Equally notable is Rhea’s account of being hosted by a local district committee chairman and his wife, who graciously offered the three women a place to stay the night in a corner of their spotless “one-roomed shack” since no spare rooms were available in the village. The wife candidly admitted that she was better off than the women in her village, but that things were bad, though “It wasn’t like this before collectivization”—something even her spouse, a Communist, admitted. The wife went on to explain how her husband, a former sailor who had travelled to England, Germany and France, ended up with the chairman’s job, seeing that he wasn’t a peasant:

“He was sent by the party. There’s lots of trouble here. Moscow wants grain, they don’t care how we get it, but the peasants have none to give. It’s not so bad in this region, we had a good harvest here, but you should see what the colhoze members get to eat. The members of the government, the village soviet and Communist Party, get government rations. We get nine kilos of flour a month, and I bake my own bread. But the peasants—they pick up the straw and corn chaff in the barns and bake it into bread. It’s killing the small children. I’m on the health committee, but what can I do? Where it will end no one knows.”³⁴

Nonetheless, the woman also made a point of saying that she wasn’t anti-Soviet, but “... sympathized with many of the things that the party wanted to do. ‘Our peasants are dark, they need wakening up and culture. But this collectivization will never do. Stalin doesn’t know it, but we who know the peasants do.’”³⁵

The next morning, Rhea and her travelling companions were confronted with the sight of a group of Gypsies who had come begging for bread, offering to sell their horses

May 1933, 1,3.

³³ See Rhea G. Clyman, “Children Fed on Chaff Die for Lack of Bread in Fertile Kuban Valley / Peasant Has Only Tepid Water to Feed Dying Wife; Lepers Sell Food in Market,” *Evening Telegram*, 27 May 1933, 1, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

or to work in exchange for food. Although several of them pleadingly knelt in front of the chairman’s home, one of the women wailing in desperation, the chairman called out at them through a window, telling them to go home. As Rhea reported about the conclusion of her stay with the party official’s family, “I left the village of Stalinsk with this cry echoing in my ears. ‘Diosh khleb (give us bread.)’ What words to hear in this lovely fertile valley of the Kuban, but this cry is heard all through the south.”³⁶

The gnawing effects of the widespread hunger that Rhea witnessed in her travels through eastern Ukraine and the north Caucasus only receded when they finally reached the Georgian Republic, where the O.G.P.U. was waiting to arrest and deport her for the handful of stories that the Kremlin regarded as having slandered the Soviet regime. Given two days to pack her belongings in Moscow, where she was briefly visited in her flat by the newly arriving British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, and his wife Katie, she reluctantly left the country under duress on 24 September 1932.

Conclusion

Once outside the U.S.S.R., Rhea was able to write freely about the great Soviet “experiment,” and she used the opportunity to finally vent all of her pent-up thoughts and feelings. Although a few stories referring to the famine and dealing with her epic journey to Georgia initially appeared in the *Daily Express* as early as November 1932, she gave her fullest and most detailed chronicle of her trip in twenty-one articles published in the *Toronto Telegram* in May–June of 1933. The series began with a blistering broadside in the form of an open letter directed at the head of the O.G.P.U., Genrikh Yagoda, who oversaw the implementation of the mass arrests, executions, and deportations to the Gulag, and who Rhea held personally responsible for the starvation of the peasantry. Added also was a later article by Rhea speculating about the death of Stalin’s wife, who committed suicide on 9 November 1932.

What is significant about her vivid and moving account of her amazing trek through the “famine-lands of Russia” is that it is the first published eyewitness record of the calamity that was beginning to engulf the Soviet countryside as a result of the Kremlin’s forced collectivization drive. Of course, as desperate as the conditions were at the end of the summer of 1932, they became exponentially worse in the months that followed, the

³⁶ *Ibid.*

artificial famine taking an especially devastating toll in first half of 1933, when the bulk of its victims died.

It is also worth noting that Rhea was already aware of famine having broken out in Ukraine by the spring of 1932, and that her trip provided confirmation about the unofficial reports that were circulating about peasants starving in some of the richest agricultural land in the Soviet Union. Nowhere does she mention drought or inclement weather being the cause of the ostensible "crop failure," but she clearly points her finger at the food collection policies that were sucking Ukraine and the North Caucasus dry of basic sustenance for the inhabitants of rural communities. Although Rhea makes no claim that Ukrainians were specifically targeted for starvation by Stalinist authorities, this isn't surprising given that she seemed to have limited or no knowledge of the specifics of Ukrainian-Russian relations, and could hardly be expected to recognize the genocidal character of the punitive policies being applied to Ukraine and the North Caucasus. Still, in one of her articles published in the *Daily Express* after she had returned to London, she makes the astute observation that,

The most interesting development in Soviet Russia is the increase in Chauvinism. It is not from the working class or the peasants that Stalin draws his support now. It is from the bourgeoisie, and the surviving military families. They see in him another Genghis Khan, and they believe that this attempt at economic conquest is only a prelude to a military one.³⁷

Clearly, she realized that a major change had taken place in the ideology of the Soviet regime, as Stalin increasingly embraced the reactionary Russian nationalist views of the former Tsarist regime, still widely held by members of its former elites, who were steeped in Ukrainophobic prejudices. It is therefore hardly surprising that in addition to the deliberate blow struck against the peasantry of Ukraine, and the sweeping purge of Ukraine's cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and political leadership, a policy of intensified Russification was also adopted at the same time by Moscow in what was a concerted effort to destroy once and for all any perceived separatist sentiments in the Soviet Union's most restive republic.

Finally, Rhea's reports from the Soviet Union are a testament to her tremendous

personal courage, her intelligence and her steadfast integrity. Unfortunately, her articles didn't get the audience that they deserved in the West, notwithstanding all of the international attention that was generated by her dramatic arrest and expulsion. Nevertheless, they provide an invaluable resource for understanding the dynamics of the early stages of the Holodomor, and for appreciating its human impact. Certainly, her eyewitness chronicle is a powerful indictment of what the Kremlin worked relentlessly to deny, downplay, dismiss, and obscure from public view throughout the decades of Soviet power. And it remains a challenge to Russian leaders today, who continue to obfuscate the truth about Russia's past just as they continue to lie to the world about their present-day actions in Ukraine.

Postscript

As unique and impressive as Rhea's adventures in the Soviet Union were, her experiences in the years following were no less noteworthy. After spending a half year in Toronto in the wake of her expulsion, she again returned to Europe in November 1933 to cover the German election in which the Nazis consolidated their hold on power. She successfully parlayed her time there into a job serving as the Munich correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, which brought her into personal contact with such prominent Nazis as Rudolph Hess and the notorious anti-Semite, Julius Streicher. Flying from Berlin to Amsterdam three days after the Kristallnacht pogroms, the plane she on was crashed in polderlands approaching Schiphol airport, killing all four crew members and two passengers. Although seriously injured, she was miraculously among the twelve passengers who survived, subsequently becoming the *Telegraph's* Canadian correspondent for a time before moving permanently to the United States in 1942, where she became a naturalized citizen in 1948. In America, she gradually faded into obscurity in the decades after the war, while struggling to make ends meet at a variety of jobs for which she was often ill-suited given her intellect and abilities. When she died in New York City in 1981 at the age of 77, her passing was not recorded in any obituaries or published notices, notwithstanding her journalistic achievements. Her firsthand account of how Ukraine and the North Caucasus were being ravaged by hunger in 1932 was, like the famine itself, quickly forgotten and overlooked by generations of "Sovietologists," political pundits, and specialists in Russian history. In rediscovering Rhea Clyman one hopes that not only her accomplishments get the attention

³⁷ Rhea G. Clyman, "Crime Wave Sweeps Russia / Workers Smashing Red Regime," *London Daily-Express*, 30 November 1932, 12.

that they richly deserve, but that the 1932–1933 famine itself gets fully acknowledged for what it clearly was and remains—not just a “tragedy,” but a crime against humanity and an act of genocide that was covered up and denied for far too long by its perpetrators, their political descendants, and far too many Western apologists for Soviet tyranny.

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