RHEA CLYMAN:
A FORGOTTEN CANADIAN EYEWITNESS TO THE HUNGER OF 1932

by Jars Balan

On 20 September 1932, the Toronto daily newspaper, *The Evening Telegram*, devoted its front page banner headline to a report 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 the *Winnipeg Tribune* and the *Vancouver Sun*, in the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Globe* on the following day, the *Montreal Gazette* on 22 September, the *Toronto Star* on 23 September, and belatedly, in the *Windsor Border Cities Star* on 8 October. Her banishment from the U.S.S.R. was also widely covered in the American press, reports appearing in Pennsylvania’s *Reading Eagle* newspaper and the *Lawrence Daily Journal-World* (published in Kansas) on 20 September; the *New York Times* on 21 and 25 September; the *Boston Globe* on 21 September and 7 October; the *Sunday Avalanche-Journal* (out of Lubbock, Texas), on 25 September; and the *Indiana Evening Gazette* on 3 October. No doubt other articles announcing her ejection from the Soviet Union were published in additional North American newspapers, as well as being carried in major Western European periodicals, indicating that the arrest of the Canadian journalist was a major international news story, which is understandable as it affected the journalistic community directly.

Miss Clyman was kicked out on the order of a Politburo resolution issued on 17 September 1932, giving her two days to leave the country on charges of publishing defamatory articles about the U.S.S.R. The “malicious” pieces cited were an article about the “nationalization of women” that was said to have appeared in an unidentified Canadian periodical, and a story about “uprisings and hunger rebellions” in the Soviet Union published in the *London Daily Express*, for which Miss Clyman served as the Moscow correspondent, along with the *Toronto Telegram*.

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 ordered out of the country in ten years?

Although there are some contradictory details and significant gaps in the available sources concerning her life, it has been possible to establish with preliminary research the broad outlines of her biography and some of the highlights of her remarkable career.

Rhea Clyman was born Rachel Gertrude Clyman —spelled Kleiman in a 1970 obituary for her brother, David, but Clyman by another brother, Jack— on 4 July 1904 in Toronto. At the age of five (some sources say she was three) she was seriously injured in an accident involving a streetcar, losing part of a leg and necessitating repeated hospital stays over the course of seven years. Her father, Solomon Clyman, passed away when Rhea was just six years old, leaving her mother with the difficult task of raising three boys and two girls without the help of a family breadwinner. Consequently, Rhea took a factory job when she was only eleven years old, and was forced to round out her limited public school education with self-study, which she later supplemented with night school courses and business classes. She is said to have even completed
a university degree during spells between jobs, though it may be that she simply took some university-level classes.

Interested in writing from her teen 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 with the agent general for the province of Alberta. However, feeling that she was getting too comfortable living in England, she 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 university and supported herself by teaching English in return.

In September 1928, when she was just about to be repatriated, she again relocated, this time to Berlin, where she acquired a “smattering” of German while observing the failure of Hitler’s first bid for power, believing this to be good preparation for the career that she aspired to in journalism.

Once again demonstrating her pluck and determination, on 23 December 1928 the twenty-four year-old Clyman left by train for Moscow with little more than 15 pounds sterling in her pocket and a firm resolve to become a foreign correspondent. 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 (she later described him as having a vocabulary of about three words in English and German), who delivered her to the Grand Hotel. There, 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, securing a posting as the Moscow correspondent for the London Daily Express, owned by the Canadian-born press baron, Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken). Some of her reports were also carried in the Toronto Evening Telegram and were picked up in other publications, though her biggest audience was with the Daily Express, which had a large and growing readership in Britain.

Like many Western journalists who were either dispatched on whirlwind fact-finding tours of the Soviet Union, or obtained coveted assignments to Moscow as foreign correspondents, Clyman was initially sympathetic to the revolutionary society that Bolsheviks were promising to create as Stalin embarked on the First Five-Year Plan. However, over time, as she began to fully comprehend the scale, brutality and insidious nature of the institutionalized terror that the Communist dictatorship rested on, her enthusiasm for the Soviet “experiment” waned. Although it has not yet been possible to review her contributions to the Daily Express and other periodicals in the first three years of her stay in Moscow, it is clear that by 1932 she had become increasingly disillusioned with Stalin’s totalitarian excesses and the failure of the Kremlin to forge a viable and more humane alternative to capitalism and democracy—even as the latter were in severe crisis due to the Great Depression.

Having made the effort to acquire a good command of Russian, Clyman was able to move about and interact freely without being dependent on a translator. Besides renting a room with a Russian family to better appreciate the daily challenges that ordinary citizens faced, she
also entered into a romantic relationship with a Russian, who was later arrested and sentenced to three years in Siberia for illegally trading in rubles. It seems that the exile of her former sweetheart helped to prompt Clyman to make a trip to the far north of Russia to investigate conditions in the labour camps there, and it is most likely that her candid reports about the horrific plight of the political prisoners that she encountered in the remote forests and mines, which led authorities to make the decision to banish her from the Soviet Union.

However, before the decree ordering her expulsion was handed down, Clyman embarked on an even more amazing trek within weeks of returning from her trip by train through Karelia to the closed city of Kem, and then on past Archangel and the Arctic Circle, to the port city Murmansk. After convincing two young American women who had just driven from Europe to Moscow to see for themselves the “brave new world” ostensibly being realized under communism, Clyman convinced them to use their vehicle to go with her on a 5,000 mile road trip through a significant swath of the territory being transformed by the Five-Year Plan. Their grueling journey took them from Moscow through Tula, Kursk, Kharkiv, the Donets basin and the north Caucasus, all the way to Georgian capital of Tbilisi (then known as Tiflis). Along the way, the women were witness to not only the oppression and the grim hunger that was especially evident in southeastern Ukraine and the Kuban, they were also exposed to the dubious achievements of the much-vaunted Five-Year Plan, which stood in sharp contrast to the enthusiastic claims made by official propaganda. The experience was enough to disabuse Clyman’s travelling companions of their romantic delusions concerning “revolutionary Russia,” and it further emboldened Rhea to lay bare the unvarnished truth about life in the worker’s “paradise.”

Below are several articles from a series of Clyman’s reports as published in the Toronto Telegram. They provide glimpses into the catastrophe that was unfolding in Soviet Ukraine and parts of southern Russia in the late summer of 1932, as Stalin ruthlessly waged “class war” against the peasantry with the intention of once and for all breaking resistance to his policy of forced collectivization, while simultaneously crushing anyone perceived to be a potential threat to Bolshevik rule—most notably Ukrainians suspected of being “nationalists”—no matter how illusory. Although Clyman obviously had no sense of the ethnic dimension of the Kremlin’s escalating campaign to impose its will on the restive Ukrainian population, she nevertheless documents many revealing details about the situation that she found in cities, towns, collective farms and villages that she visited on what she called her journey through “Russia’s Famine-Lands.” Of particular interest are the insights that she provides into the particular hardships endured by women, and it is clear from her moving descriptions that she brought a strong feminist perspective to her reporting as a journalist.

Once outside the Soviet Union Clyman wrote a detailed account of her adventures, parts of which were printed in the Daily Express beginning mid-November of 1932, and which ran in twenty-one instalments in the Toronto Telegram between 8 May and 9 June 1933. Knowing full well that she would never again be allowed to visit the Soviet Union, Clyman unleashed her outrage at the monumental atrocities being committed by the Soviet state, putting a lie to the Kremlin’s claims that it was building an egalitarian, prosperous and modern society that would soon rival and eventually eclipse the most advanced “bourgeois democracies” of the capitalist West.
Returning for a brief holiday to her hometown of Toronto in the spring of 1933, when her second major series of articles in the Telegram were going to press, she then set off for Nazi Germany in November 1933 to chronicle Hitler’s dictatorship for the London Daily Telegraph. Given her Jewish background, it is more than a little surprising that she lasted five-and-a-half years in the country as it was increasingly gripped by anti-Semitic violence, covering such seminal events as the Berlin purge of 1934, the German annexation of Austria, the Sudetenland crisis, and the negotiations that led to the Munich agreement. In November 1938, while en route to a holiday in England, she was lucky to survive the crash of an airliner ferrying refugees from Germany to Amsterdam, and needed several months to recuperate from her injuries. The following May, it was reported that Clyman had arrived in Montreal to become the resident correspondent for the London Daily Express, after which she remained in Canada for the next three-and-a-half years.

Clyman’s subsequent activities require further investigation, and her later years remain mostly a mystery. From mid-February to 24 August 1942 she had a fifteen-minute commentary broadcast on a Toronto radio station, but in October 1942 she moved permanently to the United States, where she became a naturalized citizen in 1948. Scattered reports indicate that she was on a speaking tour that took her through the American Midwest in October-November 1944, addressing factory workers in Youngstown, Ohio, as well as audiences in Waterloo, Iowa, and Wisconsin Rapids, on her five-point program for combating Nazism in postwar Germany. Still, her profile as a journalist seems to have steadily diminished after reaching its peak in the 1930s. She had a short piece titled “Stalin Outwits Shaw,” lampooning the Irish writer notorious for his praise of the Soviet Union, in the February 1945 issue of the American Mercury—a once influential magazine with a rather chequered history that by the 1940s had become increasingly conservative and in the 1950s became stridently anti-communist with anti-Semitic overtones. However, as far as can be determined so far, Clyman essentially fell silent sometime in the 1940s, an interesting exception being a letter to the editor that she had published in the New York Times on 25 November 1967 clarifying the contribution made by Americans to Soviet development during her time in Moscow. To underscore the credibility of her remarks, she identified herself as a correspondent based in the Soviet capital from 1929-33.

It seems unfortunate that when Rhea Clyman died in New York City in July 1981 at the age of 76, her passing went unnoticed by the press, notwithstanding her groundbreaking and truly impressive career as a journalist. Certainly the passion, courage, and keen eye for detail that she exhibited in her reports from the Soviet Union at a critical juncture in its evolution, certainly deserve to be better known not only by students of Soviet history, but by all of the descendants of those who suffered through the beginning years of Stalin’s quarter-century reign of terror.