

Philip Jordan and the October Revolution

In 1917, writes Jamie H. Cockfield, the American Ambassador's valet reported on revolutionary events in Russia through letters to the family at home.

When President Wilson appointed David Francis of Missouri as United States Ambassador to the Russian Empire in 1916, the new diplomat took with him to St Petersburg his faithful valet, Philip Jordan. Born the son of an emancipated slave in 1868, Jordan had entered the service of the Francis family in 1889 when David Francis was the Democratic Governor of Missouri. Except for a period of service under Francis' successor, Governor William J. Stone, Jordan remained in the employment of the Francis family until his death in 1941.

Jordan was only one of two blacks known to have been an eye-witness observer of the Russian Revolution of 1917 (the American embassy also employed a black Trinidadian cook), but his letters from the Russian capital at the time are the only account of events written by a member of his race. Moreover, they are the only record of events written by a westerner of working-class origin.¹

The correspondence was sent mainly to the Francis family, especially to Mrs Jane Francis, the Ambassador's wife, who had given Jordan the little education that he had received. The letters are full of the activities of 'the Gov', but Jordan also described the turbulent times in Russia as he saw and understood them. Although sometimes his comprehension of events was naive, his account of the Revolution provides a different perspective from that of more sophisticated writers such as John Reed.

Most of the letters in the collection were handwritten by Jordan, although some are copies made later by an unknown person.

Unfortunately not all of Jordan's letters survived, for Jordan referred to some not found in the collection. The first extant letter is dated September 19th, 1917, sixteen months after the writer's arrival in Petrograd in May, 1916.

A curious aspect of the letters was that the author's spelling of large English words, as well as of Russian names and terms, was usually correct, while commonplace words were frequently misspelled. As for grammar, the letters were almost totally devoid of any punctuation, and his use of capitalization was bizarre.

For example, Jordan always employed lower case letters for the first letter of the first word in a sentence unless it began with the pronoun 'I' or a word beginning with the letters 'j' or 's', which he never failed to capitalize. These usages produced a nightmarish prose, and in the interest of clarity, the grammar has been corrected. Jordan's diction, however, remains unaltered except for some minor changes placed in brackets.

The excerpts selected for this article are taken from the letters leading up to and immediately after the October Revolution. The first letter brings Mrs Francis up to date on the disturbing events of the summer of 1917:

Petrograd, Russia September 19, 1917

Dear Mrs Francis,

Your letter dated July 9th arrived yesterday. I am writing you again with lead pencil because I am away out here in the country with the Ambassador and the Red Cross Commission and have no ink.

I believe there will be more people starve to death here in Petrograd than they will kill with bullets. It does certainly look mighty bad right now, and think what it will be when she drops to 38 & 40 below! The Gov was reading Mr. J. D. R. Francis² letters to me about the Gov getting blown up by a bomb. I am glad to tell you, 'Not yet, but soon.' Excuse slang.

The Gov and I have been killed so many times in the last twelve months that we are getting use to it. Some days and nights you will see on the Nevsky Prespect [Prospekt] ten or twenty thousand marching with black flags and banners reading that we are on our way to kill all Americans and all rich people.

That includes me and [all] who has on a white shirt. I will tell the Gov that they are on the way again to kill us. The Gov will say, 'All right, are you ready?' I will say, 'Yes, I am ready.' So the Gov will tell me to load the pistol and see if she's in working order. He says that he will get two or three before he goes.

Jordan, of course, over-dramatized the situation of foreigners in Russia. At no time during the events of 1917 was the American Ambassador in grave personal danger, nor were Americans the object of street demonstrations. Throughout the correspondence Jordan embellished what he saw, reporting in detail conversations on the street and elsewhere that he could hardly have understood as clearly as he reported. In this letter he continued with a description of both the attempt of the Bolsheviks to seize power in July, 1917, and the Kornilov revolt of August:

On July 17 at about 8 P.M., the cossacks and soldiers had a terrible fight just in back from the Embassy.³ The cossacks, as you know, always fight on horseback. They made a charge on the soldiers, who was in the middle of the street with machine guns and cannons. Oh my, what a slaughter! After 30 minutes of fighting [I] counted in a half a block 28 dead horses. When the cossacks made their charge, the soldiers began to pump the machine guns, and you could see men and horses falling on all sides. After the dead was carried away and it was quiet once again, we all went to bed.

Well, at 5 minutes to twelve, the guns and cannons began to roar again. I jumped out of bed and rushed to the Winter Palace Bridge, and oh, such a sight! The Bolsheviks had started to come on this side of the town, and the soldiers was waiting for them at the foot of the bridge. Just as they was about on the middle of the bridge, the soldiers opened fire with the machine guns and cannon. It was one grand sight! The sky was full of the prettiest fireworks you ever saw. You know during a revolution or any kind of fighting everybody has to lay flat on your stomach. I was laying flat behind the man that was pumping the machine gun.

One week ago the Gov and I went to the Nicolie [Nikolaevskii] Station. While we were at the station, thousands and thousands of soldiers was coming out of the station. They had just arrived from the front. The report was out that Genl. Kornilov⁴ was coming to take charge of the Government. They marched out to the end of the Nevsky where they began to dig trenches. Just think of digging trenches in the heart of the city! Something happened that Genl. Kornilov did not carry out his part, so it did not take place. If this had of taken place, it would have been awful.

To this discussion of politics, Philip added a P.S. describing the scarcity of food in the capital:

I see from the papers that the people are complaining about having to pay 10 cts. for a loaf of bread. I wish I had that bread over here at 10 cts. a loaf. I could sell it without any trouble for \$5.00 a loaf. I know a very rich family with the finest furnished house I was ever in worth millions and can not get anything to eat.

They told me that they would be only too glad to pay 50-75 or 100 dollars for one lb. of butter. I have a woman who brings milk and cream from the country, and I take them a bottle of milk and cream once a week only trying to do my bit. This Ford automobile is certainly a lifesaver. I go all through the villages and buy chicken and vegetables.

The following letter is third in the collection, but the excerpt from it is given next because it deals with fighting discussed in the first letter, and gives additional information on the after-math of the July Days.

Petrograd, Russia

November 30, 1917

To Miss Annie Pulliam and the Francis Family Dear Miss Annie,

Please excuse pencil. I am so awful nervous today that I cannot use pen and ink. The Ambassador and I went to the Kasan [Kazan Cathedral] on Sunday [for the funeral of the cossacks who died defending the Provisional Government against the Bolsheviks]. We heard the most tremendous voices... [illegible]... all my life. Thousands and thousands of people attend this church. They came in and make the sign of the cross and kiss the bare floor where some saint stood some 50 or 75 years ago. I have not been back because I am still tired. I was standing in one place for 3 hours, first on one foot and then on the other. They do not have chairs so that a person could rest for a few minutes and then go at it again.

Now to put away the dead. The funeral was the largest that was ever in Russia, and I believe the largest in the world. The press said over one million people was at the St. Isaac's cathedral that day. Miss Annie, think of such a large crowd and all frightened half to death! Every time the man would strike his base drum, the crowd would shiver. The report got out that at three o'clock that the Black Hundred would start throwing bombs. This Black Hundred is the worse gang in Russia. They are not afraid of bombs because they always carry two coat pockets full. I don't know why, but they did not do any bomb throwing.

The second letter in the collection was to Mrs Francis and followed the first by two months. During that time the Bolsheviks had seized power. Jordan's account of the October events, given next, generally agrees with that of better educated eye-witnesses.

Petrograd, Russia

[November 18, 1917]

Mrs Francis,

On last Tuesday⁵ the Bolsheviks got the city in their hands, and I want to tell you that it is something awful. The streets are full of [all] the cut-throats and robbers that are in Russia. You can hear the machine guns and cannons roaring all night and all day. Thousands are being killed. Why we are alive, I cannot tell. They break into private homes and rob and kill all the people.

In a house not very [far] from the Embassy, they killed a little girl, and 12 bayonets [were] found stuck through her body. Oh, the horrible sights that is to be seen! Petrograd is all shot to pieces, but it is not near as bad as Moscow. The report received this morning is that over twenty thousand have been killed [an exaggerated figure]. We have 8 soldiers who are on duty day and night. Of course, they can't do anything but keep out the robbers.

If the Red Guard [the Bolshevik Militia] or the Black Hundred should ever attack the Embassy and these soldiers would fire one shot, I am sure that they would kill every American in Petrograd. Think of all this going on and also think how we all ought to be frightened to death! But to tell you the honest truth, I don't think we have two people in the Embassy that has at one time lost his head or his nerve.

There is so much of this going on all the time that you hardly pay any attention to it. On Friday at 3

o'clock I went to the fortress where they have all the new minister [i.e., ministers of the Provisional Government]. This is the St. Peter and St. Paul [Pet-ropavlovskii Fortress]. While crossing the Letena [Aleksandrovsky] Bridge, I saw all 5 of the bridges opened and 4 large battleships passed on their way to meet Kerensky's army. One ship was left in front of the Winter Palace, where it is firing. I never saw so many people the day these ships went through the bridge. Millions of them! I have found out that the best thing to do right now is to keep your mouth shut and look as much like an American as you can.

The general lawlessness disturbed Jordan a great deal, and he returned to this theme again and again in his letters:

All the things that have been turned out of prison was armed with a rifle. I heard three or four shots fired, and at one time a man not very far from me fell dead. On last Thursday there were 12 soldiers guarding the Embassy, but just before the fighting started they all went back to the school where they are training to become officers. 11 of these was shot besides 6 or 7 hundred more.

All the business houses and banks are closed. The city is pitch dark. At times we only have tallow candles for light. The plants have no coal and very little wood. The banks are in the charge of the Bolsheviks and escaped convicts, and thieves are on guard with machine guns and rifles. The food question is growing worse every day.

To Miss Annie, Jordan gave a more historical account of the October events in his letter of November 30th, which has already been cited in the description of the July uprising:

Just about three weeks ago the Bolsheviks shot Petrograd all to pieces. All the ministers was supposed to be hiding in the [Winter] Palace. At 12:35 A.M. the machine guns and cannons began to roar. When I was in two blocks of the place I saw about 12 or 15 machine guns turned on that beautiful building. Out of all the noise, now and then you could hear a cannon shot. I could not see where it was coming from because it was pitch dark.

Next morning I went to see how much damage was done and what should I see in the middle of the Never [Neva] River but two large battleships! They also had their big guns trained on the palace. I can't describe the damage done, but you can guess about what happened to that building the next day at 4:30. [I saw the bridge] open and 4 large battleships passes up the Neva on their way to Pavlovsk to meet Kerensky, who was coming to Petrograd on his way from the front with an army⁶.

They had an awful battle for three days, but the Bolsheviks was the strongest and drove them back. This small city where the battle took place is about 30 versts from Petrograd. Well, after the battleships finished firing on all those frame houses, you can judge how much is left.

After digressing into a Russian history lesson, Jordan returned to his favourite theme, the lawlessness under the new regime:

Right through here you can't tell at what minute you will be killed. These crazy people are killing each other just like we swat flies at home. The Embassy is guarded every night by two of the clerks who takes turns about each night. The Red Guard and the Black Hundred are robbing and killing every night.

All the cut-throats, thieves and bomb throwers in Russia have flocked to Petrograd. They stab

people on the streets, make them undress, and go home without any clothes on. The men with their diving suits are taking people out of the Neva just like we go fishing at home. The Bolsheviks kill and then in the Neva you go. We have no government, no law, and no protection of any kind. All the convicts and thugs in Russia are walking the streets with rifles.

This section was followed with an account of how the Bolsheviks closed down what was apparently a free market while Jordan was there buying groceries. He ended this description with a conclusion that certainly must have passed through the minds of many Russian liberals by November, 1917:

They then began to shoot to frighten the people and took everything in the market. Think of it, and no law to protect you! They will take all this [food] and give it to the other Bolsheviks, but they won't give the other people any. The best people in Russia will not recognize these Bolsheviks, so the Bolsheviks are going to take all the food and starve them to death. The Royal Family is no more, but at times I think it would be a mighty good thing if the czar was put back again.

Conditions worsened further in the months following the Revolution. With the armistice came the Germans to Petrograd, filling the hotels and restaurants. Philip lamented the fact in a letter to Mrs Francis on January 10th, adding that 'old Russia' was 'through' as far as the war was concerned. 'You can see,' he told her, 'thousands and thousands of soldiers and sailors returning from the front'. In his letter of January 17th, 1918, Philip described the death blow administered by the Bolsheviks to the Constituent Assembly, the only democratically elected institution of government Russia ever had.

Today is the day that the Constituent Assembly will open. [It opened on January 18th]. It is now 3:30 P.M., and it has not opened. At 11 A.M. a crowd of about 2,000 with banners reading 'Long live the Assembly!' was fired on just one block from the Embassy, and ever so many were killed. I have just returned from the street where the firing is going on and people are running for their lives. I could count at least 10 dead ones, but the machine guns was turned in my direction and just about that time I had business at the Embassy.

All over town you can see men on top of houses with machine guns. We are looking for one of the worst battles to take place tonight. The icebreaker steamed up the Neva River on Tuesday and broke the ice so that 4 battleships could come up. They are now at anchor just below the Winter Palace where they are all ready for business. From where these battleships are they can tear Petrograd all to pieces in a few hours. I can hear the cannons roaring. People are running by the Embassy. Goodbye. The very best of luck to you all.

Respt., Philip

[P. S.] A soldier has just fell dead across the street.

Jordan's last letter from the capital, dated February 12th, 1918, contained a scurrilous attack on the Bolsheviks for their policies against the rich:

The Bolsheviks are sully in charge of things, and they are awful hard on the rich. Last week they put a fine of nine hundred thousand roubles on some merchants because they would not clean the snow from in front of their shops. The merchants said they could not pay that much money because they did not have it. The Bolsheviks said, 'All right.' Well, they made the merchants go on the street and clean the snow, and after they finished cleaning from in front of their stores, they made them go all over the city and clean.

These Bolsheviks are treating the rich oh so bad. Just think, a man that was very rich two or three months ago, worth millions of roubles, is now cleaning snow on the street for 6 or 8 roubles a day. They must either do that or starve. Think if Mr. and Mrs. Breckinridge Jones or Mr. & Mrs. Wm. H. Lee [prominent St. Louisians] was ordered to be on a certain street tomorrow morning at ten o'clock to clean the streets. Do you think they would go? They might not in America, but here in Petrograd they would be on hand at the appointed time.

At the end of the month, Ambassador Francis and Philip left Petrograd, never to return.

The approach of German troops made the move necessary, and the American legation finally settled in Vologda. Philip continued to write about 'Poor Petrograd', a city he had come to love. His later letters show a concern for the city's people, who he heard had nothing to eat but the rotten flesh of slaughtered horses (letter to Mrs Francis, March 9th, 1918). He pitied them in their misery. Yet Philip Jordan never completely understood the momentous events to which he had been a witness.

He could not see why someone always suffers in a revolution. Had he ever heard of Tuchev, which is unlikely, he most certainly had never read his verse praising the luck of an individual present during historic times. Philip Jordan had been privy to the councils of Tuchev's gods; but this son of a former slave did not like their company. As early as November 18th, 1917, he had written to his mistress, 'After living in a wild country like this for 18 months, it makes you feel like there is only two decent places to live. One is Heaven and the other is America.'

¹ I am indebted to the owner of this collection, the Missouri Historical Society, St Louis, Missouri, for allowing me to publish these letters and for providing me with xeroxed copies of them.

² The Ambassador's son.

³ July 17th, 1917, was the bloodiest day of the so-called 'July Days', during which Bolshevik-led mobs made a clumsy bid to topple the Provisional Government. The only major military force supporting the Government was the Cossack patrols. Many of the 'soldiers' as Jordan distinguished them, were on the side of the Bolsheviks.

⁴ General L. G. Kornilov was a prominent military leader who tried to establish order in Petrograd in September, 1917, and destroy the power of the leftists. His movement was defeated by co-operation between the Provisional Government and the Socialist-dominated Petrograd Soviet.

⁵ Tuesday (Jordan obviously means 'the Tuesday before last') would put the date of the Bolshevik take-over on November 6th. It actually began early on the morning of the 7th.

⁶ Jordan is incorrect about the destination of the ships. By Friday, November 16th, Kerensky's force at Gatchina had been routed, Kerensky had fled, and his military leader, General Krasnov, had been arrested by the Bolsheviks. Chamberlin I, 332.