WAR CABINET, 16.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Saturday, December 23, 1916, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON OF KEDESTON, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.
The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.
The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, M.P.

In attendance:


Lieutenant-Colonel Sir M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., Secretary.

Lieutenant-Colonel W. DALLY JONES, Assistant Secretary.

Captain L. S. AMERY, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

Alien Princes Deprivation of Titles Bill

Attended in connection with Minutes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5:

Lord Robert Cecil, Foreign Office.

The American peace overtures.

1. The War Cabinet decided that the question of the policy to be adopted in regard to the Alien Princes Deprivation of Titles Bill must be discussed before Parliament reassembles. The Chancellor of the Exchequer undertook to place the War Cabinet in possession of the facts of the situation.

2. The War Cabinet had before them the following documents relating to the American peace overtures:

(a.) A memorandum by Lord Robert Cecil, dated 22nd December, 1916, on the subject of proposed action in regard to the American note (Appendix I).

(b.) A draft reply, prepared by M. Briand, to the peace overtures of the President of the United States of America (Appendix II).

The War Cabinet first considered the general lines of the reply to be made to the American Note, viz., whether it should be on the line of the first alternative suggested by Lord Robert Cecil and M. Briand's reply, in effect an evasive reply; or the second alternative, which proposed that we should explain in general terms the objects for which we are fighting, including insistence on a final settlement of the Turkish question.

As a preliminary step it was decided that Lord Robert Cecil should prepare, for the consideration of the War Cabinet, a draft reply on the lines of his second alternative.
The War Cabinet were informed that Mr. Balfour was also preparing a draft reply.

Lord Robert Cecil undertook to telegraph to Russia in the sense that the Government was considering the two alternatives proposed, and were inclined towards the second.

3. The War Cabinet had under consideration a draft reply, prepared by M. Briand, to the German peace overtures.

It was decided that the draft should be taken as a basis for the reply, and that, in the first instance, the Foreign Office should suggest amendments.

4. With reference to a telegram from the British Minister at Athens, dated the 21st December, 1916 (Appendix III), the War Cabinet approved the guarantees to the Greek Government against a Venizelist invasion, suggested in the telegram.

5. The War Cabinet discussed the desirability of attaching a British Political Officer to General Sarrail. One of the obstacles which presented itself to this proposal was the difficulty of preventing the other Allies from attaching their Political Officers, which would cause great confusion.

The War Cabinet approved an alternative proposal that a first-rate diplomatist should be accredited to M. Venizelos, who is known to be dissatisfied with the present lack of intercommunication with the British Government.

6. With reference to Minute 7 of 22nd December (War Cabinet 15), the War Cabinet further discussed the draft telegram to the Dominions, in view of an amendment suggested by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in the original draft. The effect of this amendment was to invite the Dominions to participation in a special War Conference, which was to be additional to, and separate from, the discussions at the War Cabinet.

(See words enclosed in square brackets in Appendix I of Minutes of War Cabinet 15.)

It was pointed out that the effect of this amendment was contrary to the decision of the Cabinet, which was that participation in the discussions of the War Cabinet was to supersede the idea of a Conference on former lines.

Sir G. V. Fiddes, who attended in the absence of the Secretary of State for the Colonies, said there must have been a serious misunderstanding. The Secretary of State for the Colonies had certainly understood that an Imperial Conference was contemplated, and that this had been promised by the Prime Minister on the 19th December. The Dominions might want to raise other topics besides those suitable to meetings of the War Cabinet. There was also the status of other Dominion Ministers, besides Prime Ministers, or their substitutes, who might wish to attend. It was for these reasons that the Secretary of State had suggested the amendment, in his letter to the Prime Minister of 22nd December, and he had been given to understand that the amendment was approved.

On these points it was agreed—

(1.) That the promise of an Imperial Conference was more than covered by participation in the War Cabinet, which would be preferred by the Dominions;
That other topics, if raised by the Dominions, might be discussed outside the Cabinet, but that it was preferable not to invite such discussion, but to confine the invitation to questions of urgency during the war or arising immediately out of its termination;

That other Dominion Ministers could come in as assessors, but that, in any case, it should be left to the Dominions to raise that point. The draft, as finally approved, is printed in Appendix IV.

7. The War Cabinet also approved the telegram by the Secretary of State for India printed in Appendix V.

The War Cabinet considered that, having regard to the great services of India during the war, and the character of the assistants to the Secretary of State for India suggested in his Secret telegram to the Viceroy (Appendix VI), there could not possibly be any tenable objection on the part of the Dominions to the inclusion of a distinguished Native of India among the assistants. It was, however, agreed that it might be convenient to postpone the publication of the names of the representatives for the present.

(Initialled) D. Ll. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
December 23, 1915.

APPENDIX I.

Memorandum by Lord Robert Cecil.

Proposed Action in regard to American Note.

Two lines of reply seem open to us in dealing with the American note. We may either inform the Americans that we are not prepared to make any statement as to terms of peace at present; that Germany was the aggressor, and it is for her, if she wishes to do so, to make any proposals in the direction of peace; and that we cannot admit in any way the doctrine that the aims of the belligerents are identical or similar, or that at this stage any good purpose would be served by admitting the intervention of a neutral Government.

The advantage of a reply on some such lines as that would be that it would emphasise the impossibility of considering any peace terms at present, and that it would put heart into the most determined parts of the Allied populations, and that it might stifle the protests of those who are inclined to look about for some means of putting a stop to the war.

On the other hand it has considerable disadvantages. It would certainly strengthen the position of the military party in Germany—they would be able to say with some plausibility that nothing remained for any decent German but to fight until he was killed. Then its effect on the Allied pacifists is at least doubtful; it might be just the reverse of what we wish; it might induce them to say that there is no hope for peace under the existing leadership, and the only thing is to insist on an immediate cessation of war. They might argue that if our terms were at all moderate or defensible we should have been only too glad to state them, and the fact that we refuse to state them shows that we know them to be utterly unacceptable to all moderate men. In this country particularly any irreconcilable attitude is apt to be unpopular. Englishmen do not mind doing violent things, but they like to persuade themselves that they are all the while models of moderation. I confess that I should be a little afraid of the effect of the above reply upon English public opinion. Its effect on neutral opinion could scarcely be anything but bad. There would no doubt be a certain number of people in the Eastern States of America who would applaud anything which had the appearance of strength, but unfortunately the East of America is of very little political importance at present. The President was elected by the votes of the West and South, and it is scarcely too much to say that any action warmly applauded by Eastern capitalists is on that very account likely to be disapproved by Western opinion. The
President himself would evidently be much disappointed, to put it mildly, and though, on reflection, I think it very unlikely that he would proceed to directly hostile measures against the Allies, undoubtedly he would look about for means to make them feel his displeasure. He would very possibly stir up again the agitation about the blacklist; he might go so far as to exercise the powers given to him in the last Session of Congress to hold up ships which refuse black-listed cargo. The mails question would be, of course, raised again, and he might then go so far as to enter into correspondence with the Swedish and perhaps the Dutch Governments with the object of enforcing their views as to the illegality of our blockade operations. Very little encouragement from America would make the Governments of Sweden and Holland impossible to deal with. When an atmosphere of irritation had been created by methods of this description, it is not at all impossible that the President would feel himself strong enough to proceed to much more drastic measures.

The other line which we might take would be to protest in the strongest way against the American assumption that both sides were fighting for the same objects; and state again with vigour and directness the origin and purpose of the war as we understand it. There might then be a reference to the American claim to humanity, with an expression of regret that it had so far produced little active results, enumerating the various occasions in which they had failed to interfere to check or punish German outrages or atrocities. We should then go on to say that the general objects of the war, as far as we were concerned, had often been stated, and were quite well known; that we had no objection to restate them in a somewhat fuller form. We should then reiterate that we required restoration and repatriation for Belgium and Serbia, the evacuation of all occupied territory of the Allies in France, Russia, and Roumania. Beyond that we should say that we looked for some territorial settlement that would have a chance of permanence; that it would and must be based on principles acceptable to human feeling, such as nationality and security. On these grounds France would be entitled, in our view, to such a rearrangement of her eastern frontier as would render impossible such an unprovoked attack as she had been the victim of in the present war, and also should have given back to her those provinces which were ethnologically French. In Russia we should look for the formation of a real Poland, including all Poles, whether before the war Germans, Russians, or Austrians, autonomous in government, but under the protection of the Russian Emperor.

The same principles would be applied to Italy, including such alterations of territory as would give to her security in the Adriatic. As to the South-East of Europe, which has long been the breeding-place of European disturbances, a settlement on sound national lines is, in our view, essential: the details of it cannot be laid down at present; but they would include the liberation of Slav peoples from German domination. Not less important is the final settlement of the Turkish question, and when we came to this point I think we should speak very strongly. We should insist that Turkish action during the present war had made it finally impossible for her to be allowed to have under her control any population which was of other than Ottoman nationality, or to remain as one of the European Powers. She must in fact be relegated to Asia. We should then explain that in our view, both on commercial and political grounds, it was essential that Russia should have control of Constantinople, with proper safeguards for free navigation of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.

Further than this we should explain that we could not go. To ask us to lay down terms of peace in detail would be, in the Prime Minister's phrase, to ask us to put our heads into a noose. The general principles we had explained in sufficient detail to make them quite clear, but the manner in which these principles should in each case be worked out and the subsidiary provisions necessary for reparation and indemnity we could not discuss until the time for peace came. And then we could add any necessary peroration as to our determination to continue the war.

Without expressing any final opinion as to the desirability of either of the two courses which I have sketched, I cannot help feeling that the second would give us an opportunity of explaining vigorously and effectively to the Americans and other neutral nations, as well as to our own people and the Germans, that our aims are really based on justice and liberty, and that when we use those phrases we have something definite in mind beyond mere verbiage. It would also enable us to put on a proper footing the Constantinople question, which will assuredly be one of our great difficulties in the near future.

As to the league of nations for the prevention of war, our course is tolerably clear, whatever line we adopt on other questions. We should express the utmost sympathy...
with the proposal, and should ask what was exactly meant by the promised support of
the United States. Did it mean that the United States Government had the will and
the power to give armed support to the decisions of any such league? And we should
refer to Senator Stone’s recent speech on the subject. We should further enquire
whether the province of the league was to extend to the American continent, and
profess our readiness to enter more fully into the subject when we had been satisfied
on these points.

(Initialled) R. C.

December 22, 1916.

APPENDIX II.

Draft Reply prepared by M. Briand to American Peace Overtures.

LES Gouvernements alliés ont reçu la note qui leur a été remise le 19 décembre
par le Gouvernement des États-Unis.
Il s'est étudiée avec le soin que leur commandaient à la fois l'exact sentiment
qu'ils ont de la gravité de l'heure et la sincère amitié qui les attache au peuple
américain.
D'une manière générale, ils tiennent à déclarer qu'ils rendent pleine justice à
l élévation des sentiments dont s'inspire la note américaine et s'associent de tous leurs
vœux au projet de création d'une ligue des nations pour assurer la paix et la justice à
travers le monde.
Mais cette grande heure n'a pas sonné ; auparavant s'impose la nécessité de régler
les fins de la présente guerre. Ayant eu à endurer eux-mêmes tous les sacrifices et les
douleurs qu'entraine à sa suite un conflit aussi terrible, ils éprouvent un désir aussi
profond que le Gouvernement des États-Unis de voir se terminer le plus tôt possible la
guerre dont les Empires centraux sont responsables et qui inflige à l'humanité de si
cruelles souffrances.
Mais ils ne croient pas, quant à eux, qu'il soit possible dès aujourd'hui de réaliser
une paix qui nous assure les réparations, les restitutions et les garanties auxquelles
l'agression dont nous avons été l'objet nous donne droit.
Les Alliés prennent acte, tout d'abord, de la déclaration faite que la communication
américaine “n'est associée d'aucune manière dans son origine avec celle des Puissances
centrales” transmise le 18 décembre par le Gouvernement de l'Union. Ils ne doutaient
pas, au surplus, de la résolution de ce Gouvernement d'éviter jusqu'à l'apparence d'un
appui même moral accordé aux auteurs responsables de la guerre.
Ils estiment que la note qu'ils remettent aujourd'hui même aux États-Unis, en
réponse à la note allemande, répond à la première question posée par le Président
Woodrow Wilson et constitue, suivant ses propres expressions, “une déclaration
publique de leurs vues quant aux conditions auxquelles la guerre pourrait être
terminée” et quant aux garanties “contre le retour ou le déclenchement d'un conflit
similaire dans l'avenir.”
Sur le second point traité par le Président, les Gouvernements alliés ont, au
contraire, le devoir de formuler dans la forme la plus amicale, mais la plus nette, une
expresse et énergique protestation contre l'assimilation établie entre les deux groupes
de belligérants.
Le Président écrit que “les objets que les hommes d'État des pays belligérants
des deux groupes ont eu en vue dans cette guerre sont virtuellement les mêmes,
conformément aux déclarations faites en termes généraux à leurs propres peuples et au
monde,” c'est à savoir “rendre les droits et privilèges des peuples faibles aussi assurés
contre les agressions ou dénis de justice dans l'avenir que les droits et privilèges des
États forts et puissants maintenant en guerre.”
Les Gouvernements alliés estiment que cette assimilation, si elle peut correspondre
da des déclarations publiques, n'en est pas moins en opposition directe avec l'évidence
ant en ce qui concerne les responsabilités du passé qu'en ce qui concerne les garanties
de l'avenir, et, considérant que l'Allemagne a prouvé aussi bien par la déclaration de
guerre et la violation de la neutralité du Luxembourg et de la Belgique le jour même
de cette déclaration que par la façon dont elle l'a conduite, son moyen systématique
des principes ci-dessus énoncés, fondant leur jugement non sur les discours, mais sur
les actes, ils refusent d'accorder aucune confiance à une parole tant de fois violée.
Les manifestations émouvantes qui, notamment sur le territoire de l'Union, se produisent en ce moment même contre la dernière violation du droit des gens commise par les Allemands en Belgique venant s'ajouter à celle dont les populations françaises des territoires envahis ont été victimes démontrent que cette opinion, basée sur les faits, est partagée par l'immense majorité des neutres.

En conséquence, se référant à la réponse faite par eux à la note allemande, les Gouvernements alliés en renouvellent la conclusion et affirment une fois de plus que les principes de droit et de justice énoncés par le Président et spécialement la garantie des petites nationalités et de la liberté économique menacée par une nation qui veut organiser la production de l'Europe entière autour de son industrie et pour son industrie ne peuvent résulter que de la manière dont la guerre se terminera et ne trouveront de garanties durables que dans une Europe soustraite aux convoitises brutales du militarisme prussien.

Les Alliés seraient heureux à ce moment de répondre au généreux appel du Président Wilson.

Le 23 décembre, 1916.

APPENDIX III.

Telegram from Sir F. Elliot, Athene, December 21, 1916.

Your telegram No. 1546 of 20th December.

Guarantee against Venizelist invasion was inserted in draft forwarded in my telegram No. 20 [? 58] of 17th December, firstly, because Italian Minister has positive instructions not to take part unless something of the kind is inserted. He proposed a more general guarantee, but, foreseeing objection which you had raised, I obtained unanimous adhesion to text forwarded, which, I hope, meets the case.

I consider revolution at Athens out of the question. Royalists are completely masters of the situation. Local rising in Thessaly is possible but not probable.

I will submit points 4 and 5 to my colleagues this afternoon, but it is unfortunate that they were not included in first ultimatum.

APPENDIX IV.

Proposed Amended Telegram to Self-governing Dominions.

I wish to explain that what His Majesty's Government contemplate is not a session of the ordinary Imperial Conference, but a special War Conference of the Empire. They therefore invite your Prime Minister to attend a series of special and continuous meetings of the War Cabinet in order to consider urgent questions affecting the prosecution of the war, the possible conditions on which, in agreement with our Allies, we could assent to its termination, and the problems which will then immediately arise. For the purpose of these meetings, your Prime Minister would be a member of the War Cabinet.

In view of the extreme urgency of the subjects of discussion, as well as of their supreme importance, it is hoped that your Prime Minister may find it possible, in spite of the serious inconvenience involved, to attend at an early date, not later than the end of February. While His Majesty's Government earnestly desire the presence of your Prime Minister himself, they hope that if he sees insuperable difficulty he will carefully consider the question of nominating a substitute, as they would regard it as a serious misfortune if any Dominion were left unrepresented.
APPENDIX V.

Telegram from Secretary of State to Viceroy, dated December 24, 1916.

(Private.)

With reference to announcement made by Prime Minister in House of Commons last Tuesday, I have to explain that what His Majesty's Government contemplate is not a session of the ordinary Imperial Conference but a special War Conference of the Empire. They are therefore inviting the Prime Ministers of the Dominions to attend a series of special and continuous sittings of the War Cabinet in order to consider urgent questions affecting the prosecution of the war, the possible conditions on which, in agreement with our Allies, we could assent to its termination, and the problems which will then immediately arise. For the purpose of these meetings the Prime Ministers will be members of the War Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government have invited the Secretary of State for India to represent India at these sittings of the War Cabinet, of which for that purpose I shall be a member. I desire the assistance of two gentlemen specially selected for the purpose in consultation with you, as foreshadowed in Lord Hardinge's speech in the Legislative Council on the 22nd September, 1915.

It is hoped that the meetings may take place not later than the end of February.

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APPENDIX VI.

Telegram from Secretary of State for India to Viceroy, December 23, 1916.

(Private and Personal.)

My private telegram of to-morrow regarding Imperial Conference should be made official at once and should be published on Wednesday morning. Until then it should be treated as very secret.

I shall be glad to receive early intimation of your views as to choice of the representatives to assist me. It is important that they should be men of weight and sound judgment and absolutely trustworthy, as I wish to take them, whenever possible, to the sessions of War Cabinet, where most secret matters will be discussed, and to invite them on occasion to speak for India. It is not necessary that either should be an Indian, and Dominions would doubtless prefer that both should be Englishmen, but you will probably feel that it is highly desirable that I should select one Indian.

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