WAR CABINET, 32.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, on Thursday, January 11, 1917, at 5 p.m.

Present:
The PRIME MINISTER (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON OF KEDLINGTON, KG, G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.
The Right Hon. A. HENDERSON, M.P.
The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER.
The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, M.P.

In attendance:

Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., Secretary.
Lieutenant-Colonel E. D. SWINTON, D.S.O., R.E., Assistant Secretary.
Captain CLEMENT JONES, Assistant Secretary.

Separation Allowances.

IN reference to a decision of the War Cabinet at a Meeting held on the 10th January (War Cabinet 31, Minute 12), the Secretary reported a difference of opinion as to whether the modification applied to a wife with "two or more children," as stated in the Secretary’s draft, or to a wife with "one or more children," or simply to a wife with "children."

The War Cabinet decided that:—

The Secretary’s draft was correct, and that the clause applied to "two or more children."

General Sir W. E. Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Also for Questions 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11:

Admiral Sir J. R. Jellicoe, First Sea Lord of the Admiralty.

General Nivelle’s Visit to England.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that he had been in communication with General Nivelle, and, under the impression that Monday and Tuesday would be inconvenient dates owing to the approaching departure of the British Mission to Russia, had fixed the following Wednesday (24th January) for his arrival in London. It was pointed out that for certain reasons the French
Government were anxious that General Nivelle's visit should take place as early as possible, and that their wishes could now be met, since the departure of the Russian Mission was to be postponed in deference to the wishes of the Russian Government.

The War Cabinet decided that:

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff should communicate with General Nivelle, informing him that an earlier date would now be acceptable to the British Government, and suggesting Monday, the 15th January, 1917.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a very satisfactory telegram reporting the extent of the destruction of grain and various factories in Roumania in front of the enemy's advance. He referred also to the victory gained by the British troops in the Sinai Peninsula. In reference to the latter—

The War Cabinet authorised the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to send a telegram of congratulations to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief the Egyptian Expeditionary Force upon its success.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief the Egyptian Expeditionary Force had reported that British aeroplanes were now flying to within a distance of 100 miles of Rabegh, and had been successful in bombing all the Turkish forces so far seen. He added that, according to information received by him, the Germans were expanding their forces by ten to twelve fresh divisions, which they had been probably enabled to do by the withdrawal of men from the various industries under the recent drastic regulations.

5. The War Cabinet decided that:

In view of a telegram from the British Ambassador at Petrograd (No. 40), dated the 10th January (Appendix I), the departure of the British Delegates to the Conference in Russia should be deferred until the 20th January at the earliest; and that the Foreign Office should so inform the French and Italian Governments, laying special emphasis on the fact that this postponement was carried out at the request of the Russian Government.

6. The First Sea Lord, in reference to his letter on this subject of the 6th January, 1917 (Appendix II), reported that the question of refitting battleships and cruisers to act as transports had been taken up, but that these vessels were, for various reasons, unsuitable for the purpose; their conversion would take some five weeks to carry out, and would entail delay to other urgent work. On the whole, he was not in favour of this course being adopted.

7. The First Lord stated that the Admiralty had the arrangements in hand for the forthcoming Naval Conference.
8. In reference to the reply of the Greek Government to the Ultimatum of the Allies (Appendix III), the War Cabinet decided that:

The Foreign Office should inform the French Government by telegram that the reply of the Greek Government to the Allies' Ultimatum was regarded by the British Government substantially as an acceptance of so much of the Roman Note as dealt with the withdrawal of troops and material from northern Greece, but that in respect to the other requirements of the Note there were one or two points of importance which would have to be cleared up before the blockade of the Greek ports could be relaxed.

The Foreign Office should also inform the Greek Government quite definitely that no relaxation of the blockade would be permitted until the Allied Governments were satisfied on all points with the reply of the Greeks to the Note of the Allied Governments.

9. The War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum by the Minister of Blockade on the subject of Enemy Shipping in South American ports. It was agreed that it would be a violation of neutrality on the part of the South American Republics to requisition enemy ships seeking asylum in their ports, though the indiscriminate sinking by the enemy of neutral ships might, on the other hand, be held to justify a measure of retaliation of this kind. It was also generally agreed that, in view of the present serious shortage of tonnage, considerations such as the fact that the purchase of enemy ships might put the enemy in funds, which had previously carried great weight, should now be disregarded.

The War Cabinet decided that:

The question should be dealt with by the Minister of Blockade, the Shipping Controller, and the President of the Board of Trade, who should report their action to the War Cabinet.

10. The First Sea Lord stated that the Admiralty desired to take up eight coasting steamers to be fitted out as decoy vessels to engage German submarines, the employment of such vessels having been found, on the whole, to be the most effective method of dealing with submarines. He drew attention to the fact that the destruction of even one enemy submarine might possibly save the subsequent loss of many of our merchant vessels.

The Shipping Controller stated that he fully realised the importance of this work, and had already released two ships to the Admiralty, but felt that the responsibility for the release of further vessels from the carrying trade should rest with the War Cabinet, in view of the great pressure being exerted by the French and Italian Governments to obtain tonnage, particularly for the conveyance of coal.

The War Cabinet decided that:

Six further coasting vessels, or eight in all, should be released by the Shipping Controller for the purpose indicated.

11. The War Cabinet had under consideration a note by the President of the Board of Trade, of the 6th January, 1917, on the
subject of "The Position with regard to the Requirements of Coal for France."

It was decided that:

This subject should be referred for consideration by the forthcoming Allied Naval and Shipping Conference.
APPENDIX I.

Telegram from Sir G. Buchanan (Petrograd), No. 40, of January 10, 1917.

(Urgent.)

MY telegram No. 39.

I received Lord Milner’s telegram from home after seeing the Minister for Foreign Affairs this morning, but communicated its contents before he saw the President of the Council. He has now informed me that the latter would prefer that the date of departure should be postponed till 20th January if this does not cause inconvenience to His Majesty’s Government. I gather that one reason why he desires this postponement is that the Duma is to meet 25th January, and that he would sooner that conference did not assemble till after first two or three sittings, which may be very stormy ones.

APPENDIX II.

THE UTILISATION OF FIGHTING SHIPS FOR THE CONVEYANCE OF TROOPS.

For War Cabinet, from First Sea Lord.

THE question of utilising fighting ships for the conveyance of troops in the Mediterranean has been investigated.

In order to fit a battleship of the “Exmouth Class to carry a battalion of infantry, it is estimated that at least five weeks is required in which to effect the essential alterations. A considerable amount of work is involved in providing even the minimum of comfort for the troops, a battleship being a most unsuitable type of ship to use for this purpose. This work involves not only expense, but also labour which is urgently required for important work affecting the fighting efficiency of the Navy, and it can only be carried out at the expense of deferring the refits of other fighting ships, whether it is carried out in a Royal dockyard or by contract.

The “Magnificent” and “Mars,” battleships of older but similar type to the “Exmouth,” were converted for carrying troops in September 1915, but the accommodation provided was very poor, and frequent and strong complaints were lodged by the military authorities. To meet these complaints further alterations were made; the number of troops carried was reduced, but the result was not satisfactory.

The number of troops that could be sent in one of the Exmouth Class is estimated at not more than 1,000, and they would be quartered under very unfavourable conditions as compared with ordinary transports.

The personnel question is also a serious one. In order to work the ships efficiently, and to be able to maintain a good speed to avoid submarines, a large complement—estimated at 380—is required, and the greater number of these must be men who are familiar with men-of-war and their fittings. That is to say, in order to carry 1,000 troops under uncomfortable conditions, nearly 400 men, who could be more profitably employed in the fleet, are locked up. The personnel question is most serious at present especially as regards officers.

Owing to the construction of the ships it would not be possible to carry sufficient boats for all hands, and a large number of patent rafts would be required. In bad weather these rafts afford very little security.

The expense of running these ships is great as compared with ordinary transports; for owing to their greater displacement and draught of water, due to the armour carried, more coal is required, and there is more wear and tear to machinery, involving more frequent repairs and refits.

A further drawback to the use of the older type of battleships as transports is that they have a tendency to heel over and capsize if torpedoed, making it a difficult and dangerous matter to handle the boats and get them away safely; a merchant ship usually remains fairly upright for a time.

The older cruisers are even more unsuitable for use as transports, and carry fewer men.

I consider it would be a mistake to attempt the use of war ships as transports again.

J. R. J.

January 6, 1917.
Telegram No. 88 (en clair) from Mr. Erskine (Athènes) (Salamis), 10th January, 1917.

MY telegram No. 78 of 8th January.

Following reply of Greek Government was handed in at 8:30 this evening:

"Le Ministre des Affaires étrangères de Sa Majesté hellénique a eu l'honneur de recevoir la note en date du 8 janvier, 1917, que les Ministres de France, d'Italie et de Russie et le Chargé d'Affaires de Grande-Bretagne ont bien voulu lui faire remettre, d'ordre de leurs Gouvernements, en réponse au mémoire adressé aux Puissances alliées par le Gouvernement hellénique le 5 janvier, 1917.

"Tout en se référant aux assurances données à maintes reprises aux Gouvernements alliés et récemment encore par le susdit mémorandum au sujet de ses sentiments et de l'attitude qu'il est décidé à continuer, le Gouvernement Royal prend acte avec la plus vive satisfaction des garanties précises que les Puissances ont bien voulu donner à la Grèce concernant sa neutralité, sa politique intérieure et la durée du blocus. De son côté, désireux de faire en cette circonstance encore ce qui dépend de lui pour écarter tout malentendu, et prenant en considération que les garanties supplémentaires exigées après l'acceptation de l'ultimatum du 14 décembre, 1916, pour mettre à l'abri de toute inquiétude l'armée d'Orient sont déclarées constituer l'objectif immédiat et essentiel des Gouvernements alliés, le Gouvernement Royal s'engage à effectuer les nouveaux déplacements de troupes et de matériel, y compris canons et mitrailleuses, dans les conditions énoncées par les notes en date des 31 décembre, 1916, et 8 janvier, 1917.

"Dans ce même ordre d'idées, le Gouvernement Royal accepte les demandes consignées au No. 2 de la note du 31 décembre, 1916, ainsi que le rétablissement des contrôles, qui, prévus dans la suscitée note parmi les garanties exigées en vue de la sécurité des troupes alliées et pour être aussi peu gênants que possible, pourront être déterminés dans l'accord qui interviendra, sans comporter une ingérence dans les différents ressorts de l'Administration ou dans les communications à l'intérieur du pays.

"Quant aux réparations demandées, le Gouvernement Royal a déjà déclaré être prêt à donner les satisfactions propresmment dites pour les malheureux événements entre les marins alliés et les troupes grecques survenus le 1er décembre, 1916 (Nos. 5 et 6 du note du 31 décembre, 1916), et se réfère à ce sujet à son mémorandum en date du 5 janvier, 1917.

"Pour le relâchement des personnes énoncées au No. 4 de la note des Puissances du 31 décembre, 1916, le Gouvernement Royal déclare, devant l'insistance des Gouvernements alliés, retirer les objections présentées par le mémorandum ci-dessus mentionné. Lesdites personnes seront relâchées. Tout détail concernant l'exécution de cette promesse sera concerté sans retard. Le Gouvernement Royal est confiant que, de leur côté, les Puissances feront valoir toute leur influence afin que les personnes détenues pour ne pas avoir accédé au mouvement révolutionnaire ou à l'occasion de la conscription forcée opérée par le comité séditieux soient aussi libérées.

"En déclarant accepter également l'enquête administrative à effectuer conjointement au sujet des dommages-intérêts qui seraient dus, d'après la législation grecque, aux personnes qui éventuellement seraient constatées avoir injustement souffert lors des événements du 1er et 2 décembre, le Gouvernement Royal est confiant que les Puissances accepteront, de leur côté, l'enquête mixte proposée dans le mémorandum du 5 janvier, 1917, au sujet des dommages causés par la révolution.

"Le Gouvernement Royal espère qu'après cette marque suprême de ses dispositions sincères les négociations au sujet des détails à déterminer d'un commun accord pourront être menées de part et d'autre dans un esprit conciliant et avec l'intention de voir se rétablir au plus tôt possible d'une manière définitive une pleine confiance réciproque.

"Les mesures militaires exigées par l'ultimatum du 14 décembre, 1916, étant sur le point d'être terminées et toutes les garanties étant assurées par la présente acceptation du nouvel ultimatum, les conditions pour la levée du blocus précédées par le dernier alinéa de la note du 8 janvier, 1917, pourraient être considérées comme déjà réalisées. Le Gouvernement Royal croit de son devoir d'attirer de nouveau l'attention des Gouvernements alliés sur l'influence salutaire qu'exercera sur l'opinion publique du pays, exaspérée au plus haut degré, la cessation d'une mesure appliquée contre un peuple neutre et ami."
Enfin, tout en appréciant hautement les garanties des Gouvernements alliés au sujet du mouvement révolutionnaire, qui rassureront la conscience du peuple hellénique, le Gouvernement Royal exprime l’espoir que, dans l’esprit qui a inspiré l’engagement que les Gouvernements alliés ont voulu prendre dans l’avant-dernier alinéa de leur note du 8 janvier, ils voudront appliquer des mesures analogues aux territoires actuellement sous l’occupation des troupes alliées, notamment aux îles occupées après le 1er décembre, 1916.”

(Repetitions to British General, Salonica, and Admiral Thursby.)

APPENDIX IV.

Letter from the Secretary, Prisoners of War Employment Committee, to the Secretary, War Cabinet, dated January 10, 1917.

Sir,

I am directed by the Chairman of the Prisoners of War Employment Committee to forward for the information of the War Cabinet the following decisions made by the Committee at a meeting held on the 9th January, and to ask for any guidance that may be considered necessary.

The Committee were informed that the total number of combatant prisoners of war available for employment is now reduced to approximately 2,800 men. Demands were put forward by the Departments concerned, asking for labour for three main purposes:

1. The construction of a propellant factory at Avonmouth. Submitted by the Ministry of Munitions.
2. The working of iron ore mines and iron-stone quarries. Submitted by the Ministry of Munitions.
3. The construction of aerodromes. Submitted by the War Office.

In each case it was stated that the particular demand for labour was regarded as of very urgent importance in the prosecution of the war.

It was decided that from the balance of 2,800 men, 500 men should be allocated to the work described in section (1), and a similar number to that described in section (3); and that 250 men should be allocated to the Home Grown Timber Committee for timber felling. In making these decisions the Committee felt that they should be referred to the War Cabinet and should only be regarded as provisional, pending any recommendations that the War Cabinet may think fit to make as to the relative importance of any one of the above demands, above the other two.

I am, &c.

(Signed) G. D. ROSEWAY,
Secretary.