WAR CABINET, 40.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, January 22, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:
The Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.

In attendance:
The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 6 to 17).


*Lieutenant-Colonel W. Dally Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Fleet Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
*Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Weekly Summaries of External Political Affairs.

1. THE War Cabinet directed the Secretary to prepare weekly summaries of external political affairs, based on information of general interest received from abroad and communicated to the War Cabinet by the Foreign Office, Colonial Office, India Office, War Office, and Admiralty, with the special object of keeping abreast with current events all heads of Departments who are not on the regular distribution list for telegrams from these Departments. These summaries will be divided in two parts:

   Eastern.—Prepared by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Mark Sykes, M.P., Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet.

   Western and Imperial.—Prepared by Captain L. C. M. S. Amery, M.P., Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet.

It was decided that these summaries should be returned to the Secretary to the War Cabinet when read.

A distribution list is attached in Appendix I.

* Attended for a part of the proceedings.
General Staff
Weekly Summaries.

2. The War Cabinet further decided that the weekly summaries of military events, prepared by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, should be circulated by the Secretary of State for War to the same persons as the summaries of external political affairs, and should be returned to him when read.

Mesopotamia.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported to the War Cabinet that the right bank of the River Tigris, in the region of Kut-el-Amara, had now been cleared of the enemy, and that Bagdad, where there is an ammunition factory, had been bombed.

The Balkans.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that there is no sign of the concentration of any further divisions on the Moldavian front.

The War Cabinet note that the information at present available does not point to the probability of any immediate offensive on the Salonica front.

Western Front.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that a German regiment had been taken away from the Balkan front and had been located in Alsace, where the enemy had hitherto been somewhat weak. Five divisions are now concentrated on the Alsace front, which might be connected with the recent rumours from Switzerland. There was, however, no confirmation of the many rumours of a great concentration on the Western front, beyond a slight increase in the number of divisions, and in heavy artillery in the Ghent district. At present, the greater part of the enemy's disposable reserve in the Eastern theatre was engaged in Roumania.

Greece.

6. The War Cabinet had before them the reply* of the General Officer Commanding the British force at Salonica to the enquiries made by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff as to the military situation in Macedonia, and the extent to which the Greek Government are carrying out their undertakings, called for as the result of the Meeting held on the 17th January (War Cabinet, 36, Minute 3. The gist of this telegram, which was supported by ample details, is to the effect that the Greeks are carrying out their undertakings in the letter, but not in the spirit, and that the Greek Army is a potential danger in the rear of the Allied Army at Salonica.

This information does not correspond with that received from the British Minister at Athens, which is, on the whole, to the effect that the Greek Government is loyally carrying out its engagements.

The War Cabinet observe that the arrangements previously decided on for the control of the Greek movements have not yet come into effect, and they believe that this may account for the unsatisfactory and conflicting state of our information. They note, however, that the action of the various officers sent out for purposes of control has now been co-ordinated under the supreme direction of General Sarrail. It was decided that:

The Foreign Office should make communications to the French Government, in order to make the respective relations of these officers perfectly clear, and that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should repeat the gist of these to General Milne.

* A copy of this telegram is kept in the office of the War Cabinet.
7. The War Cabinet arranged that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should ascertain whether any of the officers sent out in connection with the control had yet reached Larissa or other stations in Northern Greece, and, if not, direct that they should be given their orders and despatched immediately.

The War Cabinet feel that if any obstruction is being placed by the Greek Government in the performance of their duties by these officers, very grave decisions may have to be taken.

8. The War Cabinet directed the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to invite General Milne's opinion as to the last paragraph of his telegram, in which he states that General Sarrail considers that action should be taken immediately to safeguard his rear by the occupation of Larissa and Volo, thus anticipating the Germans, and supplying himself with a new base and line of communications.

The Forthcoming Conference in Russia.

9. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs informed the War Cabinet that there was a difference of view between the British Minister at Athens and the French Government as to the date on which the salute to the flags of the Allies, as one of the terms of reparation, should be paid. The War Cabinet decided that:

In accordance with the French view, it was desirable that this apology by the Greek Government should be made at as early a date as possible, and that no great importance attached to the fact that the representatives of the Allies would return to the ships in the Pirasns after the ceremony. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should take the necessary steps to give effect to this decision.

10. The War Cabinet approved the action of the Admiralty in authorising the hauling down of the British flag on the Farsan Islands in accordance with the instructions of the Foreign Office. Particulars of this transaction are given in Appendix II.

11. The War Cabinet sanctioned a proposal of the Admiralty, which has been agreed to by the War Office, for the addition of 20 per cent. to the number of troops carried by British transports in the Mediterranean; the Admiralty taking steps, if possible, to increase the transports' establishment of rafts and belts.

12. The First Sea Lord reported that, in consequence of the receipt of information to the effect that the Germans had knowledge that the Portuguese Division was ready to sail, the Admiralty had found it necessary to postpone the departure of the force. He stated that, in view of the increased danger to the transports arising from the fact that the Germans were aware of their intended departure, and also as the division was urgently required in France, the Admiralty had made special arrangements for the despatch of a force of destroyers to escort the transports. The destroyers would sail at an early date.

13. The War Cabinet authorised the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to inform the Russian Government that the British Government would have no objection to the presence at the Conference of the British Ambassador in Petrograd.
14. The War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum by the General Staff, dated the 19th January, 1917, on the question of the number of divisions which can be sent to France during the next few months.*

It was clear to the War Cabinet that the decision on this question depends largely upon the arrangements made for Home Defence. Up to now the forces retained for Home Defence have been based upon the following Conclusions of the late War Committee, reached on the 23rd August last:—

(a.) It is reasonable to say that at the present time the enemy cannot attempt a serious invasion of this country because he cannot spare the necessary troops from the Continent—at any rate, unless he abandons his efforts against Verdun.

(b.) Apparently he has sufficient sea transport for the conveyance of 160,000 men, and as it is impossible to say now that he will not be able to spare that number of men at some future date, we should prepare to meet them unless the Navy can undertake to prevent them from reaching our coast.

(c.) No material reduction can be made in the number of troops now allotted to Home Defence other than such as may be found feasible by substituting volunteers for permanent Home Service. The sedentary forces are largely composed of draft-finding units, and they must remain in the United Kingdom in any case, while the General Service formations and mobile forces, in addition to forming for the time being part of the Home Defence forces, constitute a valuable, and in fact the only, strategical reserve for use when and where required abroad.

The War Cabinet note that neither the Admiralty nor the General Staff are able to report any change in the premises on which the above decision was reached. The General Staff state that the enemy might still be able to find 160,000 men. The Admiralty state that the enemy can still find transports for a force of this size. The Admiralty further state that they can give no guarantee that the Fleet will be able to prevent a force of this size from reaching our shores. Though it would be embarrassed by submarines and small craft, the Admiralty, particularly having regard to recent developments in the German Navy in warfare by mines and submarines, cannot guarantee that landing operations will be interrupted by the Grand Fleet within less than twenty-four to twenty-eight hours of the force being sighted off the coast of the United Kingdom. Hence, neither Department can undertake the responsibility for saying that invasion is impossible, and consequently 500,000 men, the force estimated as necessary by the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief Home Forces, is still locked up at home for the purpose of dealing with attempted invasion, for the garrisons of defended ports, and for protection against hostile aircraft.

Having discussed the matter with the First Sea Lord, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief Home Forces (who gave a sketch of the military arrangements for coastal defence), the War Cabinet decided that:—

(1.) On a review of all the risks to which this country is exposed during the present War, the danger of invasion is not among the greatest. They concur in the statement of the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief Home Forces that, in the necessity of taking risks somewhere, he, if he were a member of the War Cabinet, would send every man abroad who was fit for service, as the least of the risks to be taken.

* Copies of this are available in the office of the War Cabinet.
Man-power.

The Employment of Home Defence Forces to Assist in Civil Occupations.

The Naval Situation.

Shipbuilding and the Submarine Menace.

Further Examination of Naval and Shipping Questions.

(2.) Subject to the concurrence of the Secretary of State for the Colonies (whose opinion would be invited on the following day), they decided that pressure should be put on the Canadian Government to send abroad the additional Canadian Division at present detained in this country, owing to the difficulty anticipated in finding drafts for its maintenance.

(3.) The Chief of the Imperial General Staff should be authorised to send two additional British Divisions abroad, to be withdrawn from Home Defence.

They take note that the effect of this latter decision will be to reduce the mobile force available for Home Defence from nine Divisions to seven, not including one Division in Ireland. It was pointed out by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, however, that this decision, though involving a reduction by only about one-fifth in number, was equivalent to a reduction of one-half, when the quality of the Divisions to be withdrawn and of those remaining was taken into consideration.

15. The War Cabinet arranged with the Field-Marshal Commanding Home Defence to spare soldiers from Home Defence to assist in labour of national importance in case of emergency. The Secretary was directed to notify this decision to the Civil Departments concerned, in order that they might formulate their emergency requirements from time to time for the consideration of Lord French. The Departments concerned are:

- Ministry of Munitions,
- Admiralty,
- Board of Trade,
- Board of Agriculture and Fisheries,
- Ministry of Labour,
- Port and Transit Executive Committee,
- Shipping Controller,
- His Majesty's Office of Works.

16. The War Cabinet had under consideration a General Summary* of the Naval Situation in regard to Shipbuilding and the Submarine Menace, dated the 16th January, 1917, submitted to them by the First Sea Lord, and decided that:

The revised programme "B" should be carried out pending further consideration, and that twelve suitable merchant ships should be handed over by the Shipping Controller to the Admiralty, and that the twelve mercantile "Q" ships, referred to in programme "B," should be allotted to the Shipping Controller by the Admiralty as soon as they are built.

17. The War Cabinet decided, as a matter of principle, that:

The Naval and Shipping questions must be examined on the assumption that the war will last through the year 1918.

In conformity with this decision, the War Cabinet directed that:

(a.) The Admiralty should review the situation on these premises, and prepare a further report;

* Copies of this highly secret document are retained for reference in the Office of the War Cabinet.
(b.) The Shipping Controller should obtain data as to any actual increase of output that had been effected in the shipyards of the United Kingdom by the adoption of a system of payments by results;

(c) The Shipping Controller should have full authority to place orders on behalf of the Government for the building of merchant vessels both in the Dominions and abroad, and his attention was especially called to the desirability of sending an expert to Canada to enquire from the firms there as to what they could do;

(d.) The Minister of Munitions should be asked to enquire and report upon home resources in general, especially as to the possibilities of developing, during the next two years, the production of larger quantities of ore in the United Kingdom. He was also to be desired to report as to the amount of scrap metal that could be obtained by a collection, such as has been adopted by the Central Powers, and utilized with a view to an eventual reduction of imports.

Ferry-Boats for Cross-Channel Transport Service.

18. The First Sea Lord asked the War Cabinet to approve, with reference to War Cabinet 38, Minute 8, paragraph 2, of the Report of the Fourth Sea Lord, that “anti-submarine craft” should be understood to include destroyers and submarines.

The War Cabinet concurred, and directed that the words “which includes destroyers and submarines,” should be added at the end of Minute 8.

(Initialled) D. Ll. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W., January 22, 1917.
APPENDIX I.

Heads of State Departments.

The Prime Minister.
The Earl Curzon of Kedleston.
The Right Hon. A. Henderson.
The Viscount Milner.
The Chancellor of the Exchequer.
The Minister of Munitions.
The Home Secretary.
The Foreign Secretary.
The Colonial Secretary.
The Secretary for India.
The President of the Local Government Board.
The Secretary for War.
The First Lord of the Admiralty.

(for Commander-in-Chief, Grand Fleet).
The President of the Board of Trade.
The President of the Board of Agriculture.
The President of the Board of Education.
The Postmaster-General.
The First Commissioner of Works.
Attorney-General.
Solicitor-General.
The Secretary for Scotland.
The Chief Secretary for Ireland.
The Minister of Pensions.
The Minister of Blockade.
The Food Controller.
The Shipping Controller.
The Director of National Service.
The President of the Air Board.

APPENDIX II.

MEMORANDUM BY FIRST SEA LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY, DATED JANUARY 22, 1917.

Hauling down British Flag on Farsan Islands.

At the request of the Foreign Office, and in order to forestall a suspected Italian coup, the British flag was hoisted on the Farsan Islands and a guard landed on one of them.

At the time this action was ordered, it was stated that it was possible a communication might be made subsequently to the Idrisi explaining that the flag only signifies our protection of his claims.

The Political Resident, Aden, reported on the 11th January that the Idrisi was ready to sign an Agreement, as outlined by the Secretary of State for India, the main points being no cession or mortgage of Farsan Islands, or interest therein, to any Foreign Power, and protection by British Government from foreign aggression. Idrisi also engages to occupy islands effectively and maintain his flag thereon. India Office telegram to Viceroy, of the 10th January, gives instructions for Colonel Jacob to meet Idrisi on return from Jeddah and negotiate agreement with him, on execution of which British flag may be hauled down.

The Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, reports by telegram of the 18th January, that he had been informed through Aden that Foreign Office directs British flag to be removed from Farsan Islands, and he has given necessary orders to Red Sea Patrol.