WAR CABINET, 50.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, on Wednesday, January 31, 1917, at 11.30 a.m.

Present:

The Prime Minister (in the Chair)

The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kedleston, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.

The Right Hon. A. Henderson, M.P.

The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.

In attendance:


General Sir W. R. Robertson, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 7).

Major-General W. T. Furze, C.B., Master-General of Ordnance (for Minute 9).

The Right Hon. the Lord Devonport, Food Controller (for Minute 8).

The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.D., M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minutes 8 to 10).

Sir Mark Sykes, Bart., M.P. (for Minute 7).


Admiral Sir J. R. Jellicoe, G.C.B., O.M., G.C.V.O., First Sea Lord of the Admiralty (for Minutes 1 to 9).

Commodore L. Halsey, C.B., C.M.G., Fourth Sea Lord (for Minutes 8 to 9).

Fleet-Admiral Morgan Singer, Director of Naval Ordnance (for Minute 9).

The Right Hon. Sir Joseph Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minutes 8 to 10).

The Right Hon. Sir A. H. Stanley, President of the Board of Trade (for Minutes 8 to 11).

Sir Norman Hill (for Minute 10).


Fleet-Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Encouragement of Suggestions from Military Officers.

1. The War Cabinet instructed the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to impress on the Commander-in-Chief, British Expeditionary Force in France, their desire that suggestions as to the future tactical handling of troops, based on past experience, should be invited and encouraged from subordinate Officers, including Regimental Officers. He was to state that the War Cabinet attach great importance to the issue of a circular on the subject as soon as possible.

2. The First Sea Lord stated that, when he was Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, he had invited suggestions in regard to
anti-submarine warfare from Officers throughout the Fleet, and that after the Battle of Jutland he had appointed a number of Committees to investigate various phases of the action.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff added that similar conferences were constantly being held in France by the various Commanders in order to obtain the view of their subordinates as to the best methods of dealing with the enemy.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that a telegram had been received to the effect that General Cauboué had made a strong personal protest against General Phillips reporting the control results to General Milne. General Phillips had been directed to continue his reports.

3. The First Sea Lord reported that Wej, on the north-west coast of Arabia, had been captured by the Arabs, supported by a Naval Brigade of 250 men.

4. In continuation of the information communicated on the previous day (War Cabinet 48, Minute 9), the First Sea Lord stated that the Captain of the submarine had had himself blown out of the torpedo-tube and was saved. A portion of the crew were alive in the fore part of the ship, and efforts were being made to raise the bow of the submarine with a view to getting the men out.

5. The First Sea Lord reported that information had been received by the Admiralty indicating the intention of the enemy to sink hospital ships at sight in the Channel area (Appendix 1). The War Cabinet considered that it would be necessary, if this threat were carried out, to answer it by reprisals. It was arranged that Lord Curzon should preside over a small Committee, composed of representatives of the Admiralty, the War Office, and the Foreign Office, with a view to reporting to the War Cabinet, at an early date, their proposals as to the form reprisals should take.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

The Foreign Office should communicate to the American Ambassador, for the information of the German Government, a denial of the truth of the allegations, and at the same time state that the British Government had decided that, if the threats were carried out, immediate reprisals would be made.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

The Foreign Office should communicate to the press the wireless telegram from the German Government and the decision of the British Government in the matter.

6. The War Cabinet had before them a joint note by the Admiralty War Staff and the General Staff (dated the 29th January, 1917), on the use of Volo as an additional base for the Allied forces in Macedonia.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The sense of but not the actual document should be the subject of a communication to the French Government by the Foreign Office.

7. The War Cabinet approved the following recommendations of an Interdepartmental Committee, to the effect that Sir Reginald Wingate should be regarded as General Officer Commanding the
Hedjaz, and, as such, should be placed under the orders of the War Office.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Foreign Office should communicate this decision to Sir Reginald Wingate.

With regard to the proposal of the Committee in connection with the question of political representation with Sir Archibald Murray, the War Cabinet decided that—

The Foreign Office should attach a Political Officer to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in Egypt to act in cooperation with the French Political Officer, who is to be attached to the same Staff, in accordance with the decision of the Anglo-French Conference, held on the 26th-28th December, 1916 (I.C.-13, Minute 7).

The War Cabinet further decided that—

The instructions for the British Political Officer should be settled by arrangement between the Foreign Office, the General Staff, and Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Mark Sykes, Bart., M.P.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 36, Minute 7, the War Cabinet approved the Conclusions of the Naval and Shipping Conference (Appendix II).

9. The Minister of Munitions undertook to enquire into the possibility of producing a simpler form of 4-inch gun, for use in merchant ships, with a view to more rapid production, having regard to the fact that the life of the gun when so used is a factor of less importance than when used under ordinary service conditions.

The War Cabinet took note of the fact that the Admiralty had decided that 42—4-inch guns and 89—12-pr. guns will be surrendered from the secondary armaments of His Majesty's ships, and used for the defensive armament of merchant ships.

The War Cabinet took note of the fact that a total of 250—80-mm. French guns, and 400—90-mm. French guns have been made available by the French Minister of Munitions for the arming of merchant ships, and that orders have been placed for the mountings for the 80-mm. guns. The question of a suitable mounting for the 90-mm. guns is being considered by the Admiralty, and the necessary action to order these mountings will be taken at an early date.

The representatives of the Admiralty undertook to investigate the possibility of reducing the amount of steel required for these mountings.

The War Cabinet considered the report of the Master-General of the Ordnance regarding the surrender of worn 18-pr. guns to the Navy for use in the defence of merchant ships, and decided that—

War Cabinet, Minute 9, of the Meeting (War Cabinet 22, Minute 9) held on the 28th December, 1916, should stand, and that 200—18-pr. guns should be turned over from the Army to the Navy, and that the Admiralty should take steps forthwith to order the necessary mountings.
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that after the Battle of Jutland he had appointed a number.of
Committees to investigate various phases of the action.

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the best methods of dealing with the enemy.

Greece:
The Control
Arrangements.

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The Arab Revolt:
Capture of Wej.

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coast of Arabia, had been captured by the Arabs, supported by a
Naval Brigade of 250 men.

The Loss of a
British Submarine.

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previous day (War Cabinet 48, Minute 9), the First Sea Lord stated
that the Captain of the submarine had had himself blown out of the
torpedo-tube and was saved. A portion of the crew were alive in
the fore part of the ship, and efforts were being made to raise the
bow of the submarine with a view to getting the men out.

Hospital Ships:
Reprisals.

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Guns for Merchant Ships.

9. The Minister of Munitions undertook to enquire into the possibility of producing a simpler form of 4-inch gun, for use in merchant ships, with a view to more rapid production, having regard to the fact that the life of the gun when so used is a factor of less importance than when used under ordinary service conditions.

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18-pr. Guns.

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10. The Shipping Controller submitted a memorandum respecting delays at certain ports in unloading cargoes.

It was suggested that if the railways could handle the cargoes more expeditiously the ships would be "turned round" more speedily, and the result would be an estimated saving in tonnage of 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 tons per annum. The President of the Board of Trade suggested that an Inter-Departmental Committee should be set up composed of representatives of the Shipping Controller, Ministry of Munitions, and Board of Trade, which would investigate and report what steps, if any, could be taken which would secure the quicker unloading of the ships.

The War Cabinet decided that—

Mr. A. H. Illingworth, M.P., the Postmaster-General, should be asked to act as Chairman of a Committee composed of representatives of the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Munitions, and the Shipping Controller.

11. The War Cabinet concurred with the proposal of Sir A. Stanley as to the desirability of the issue of a War Medal to the Mercantile Marine on the conditions laid down in his predecessor's Minute of the 21st November, 1916, and concurred in the Board of Trade to submit the matter to His Majesty the King.

(Initialled) D. Ll. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

January 31, 1917.
APPENDIX I.

COPY of an en clair intercepted wireless message from Berlin to German Embassy at Washington made at 11 A.M. on the 31st January, 1917:—

“The German Government have conclusive proof that in several instances enemy hospital ships have often been misused for the transport of munitions and troops. The German Government, through diplomatic channels, have placed these proofs before the British and French Governments, and has at the same time declared that traffic of hospital ships on the military routes for the forces fighting in France and Belgium, within a line drawn between Flamborough Head and Terschelling on the one hand, and from Ouessant and Land’s End on the other, will no longer be tolerated. The enemy Powers are at liberty to carry on their traffic of hospital ships for the transport of the sick and wounded men belonging to the army on routes outside this area. In case hospital ships are in the future put to uses of transport contrary to the law of nations, the prohibition of further sea routes is hereby reserved—(to the German Government)”

APPENDIX II.

NAVAL CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS.

1. ARE the Allies making the best use of their shipping; and how best can they help one another for the common cause?

2. The question of supply of coal to France and Italy; amounts required and means of transport.

It was agreed:—

(a.) That it is of paramount importance that the Government of each Allied Country, with a view to assisting the transport of articles which are essential to the successful prosecution of the war, should take immediate steps to restrict to the utmost possible extent the importation of all other articles.

(b.) That a Standing International Shipping Committee be appointed to obtain and exchange full and up-to-date information as to the employment of the mercantile vessels under the control of the several Allies, to ascertain whether, by co-operative programmes or otherwise, the transport of essential articles can be increased, and to make such consequent arrangements with the respective Governments as may appear desirable.

It was agreed that the following recommendation of the Italian Delegates should at once be brought to the notice of the Cabinets of England and France:—

Considering that, in consequence of the tonnage situation, some Allied Countries are already experiencing the lack of raw material and other supplies essential to the prosecution of the war and to the existence of the population;

Considering that any prolongation of this state of things is bound, within a brief period of time, to result in curtailing the powers of resistance of such Allies in relation to the war;

Considering, further, that the agreed principle of community of resources and opportunities carries with it also equality of privations and sacrifices;

It was agreed:—

(a.) That a general revision of the employment of every single unit of the entire Allied Merchant Fleet shall be made, with the object of ascertaining whether and whence it is possible to divert further tonnage to more essential requirements.

(b.) That as a result of such revision, a redistribution of the tonnage belonging to the Allies or controlled by them shall be proceeded with, in proportion with their respective needs, and in such manner as to ensure equal powers of resistance to all nations engaged in the war.
(c.) That any eventual deficit existing between tonnage possibilities and the
ascertained needs of the Allies shall be calculated, these needs being
classified on an equal basis of priority from the point of view of their
relation to the war to the sustenance and life of the people.

(d.) That the Ministers responsible in all the Allied countries for the food of the
people should be asked to provide, by common accord:

Firstly, for the complete elimination of all forms of consumption
which are not strictly essential.

Secondly, for the reduction also of essential requirements, if necessary,
by means of immediate rationing, without such limits as may be
found necessary to cope with any deficit ascertained in the manner
above indicated.

To this was added a representation by General Dall'Olmo to this effect:

"If Italy does not get the tonnage, the necessity of which was set out in the
note submitted yesterday, the production of ammunition will be stopped in March,
and the offensive will be impossible, the defensive paralysed."

In general the representatives of France and Italy impressed on the Conference
the absolute necessity of a constant and continuous supply of coal to France and Italy,
failure of which the output of munitions would be gravely imperilled.

The First Lord undertook that this point would be kept before the notice of the
Cabinet.

3. Whether the congestion at French ports, due to lack of rolling-stock, can be
further relieved, and, if so, how.

As regards (3), the Conference accepted the assurance of the French delegates
that everything that could be was being done to relieve the congestion at the French
ports, by increasing rolling stock and labour on the railways, and especially by
establishing depots inland from the ports for the detraining of material, thereby
relieving the sheds at the docks.

4. The shipping resources of the three countries, what can be done towards
building merchant ships and patrol craft, and their types.

French.

The statement of the French officers showing the requirements for materials, steel,
and engines, having been handed in and read, the Third Sea Lord promised that every
effort would be made to meet them, and that it appeared possible that the Ministry of
Munitions might be able to reduce temporarily the work on shell steel for the French
Army (in view of the large accumulation in England), so that the steel required by the
French Navy can be rolled.

As regards thirteen merchant cargo-ships, nearing completion, arrangements will
be made for the immediate supply of the outstanding material required to complete
them, as soon as the details of requirements have been received from the O.I.P.

With regard to engines for motor lighters and for tugs, it was pointed out that
some of the former required might be ordered at once from Messrs. Ruston Proctor, of
Lincoln, and that engines for one or two tugs from Messrs. Sissons, of Gloucester.

To facilitate supplies of steel material it was agreed that:

(a.) Qualities demanded should be reduced to two, namely, boiler plates and
constructional, and

(b.) The nearest British dimensions would be accepted instead of metric.

Italian.

The Italian requirements having been handed in and read, the Third Sea Lord
stated that every effort would be made to supply these increased requirements over
those which were already being arranged for, but that in the present stringency of raw
material, and the great demand on the rolling mills of the country for the Allied
Armies and Navies, it was impossible to guarantee until the position has again been
thoroughly gone into by the Minister of Munitions that the amount can be supplied.

5. Questions relating to alterations in the zones in the Mediterranean.

It was agreed:—

(1.) That the dividing line between Zones V and VII should be a line joining
Elaphonisi (south-west point of Crete) to Cape Spartivento at a position
15 miles from Cape Spartivento;

(2.) That the dividing line between Zones V and X should be the meridian of
Elaphonisi to the southward;

(3.) That the dividing line between Zones VII and VIII should be a line joining
Cape Tripiti, in Crete, to the south point of Santorin, thence following the
East Coast of Santorin to the north-east point of Sikino, thence follow the
East Coast of Siphano to the north-east point of Serpho to the south point
of Thermia to Cape Colonna;

(4.) That the dividing line between Zones VIII and X should remain unaltered,
except when it is affected by the slight modification of the meridian
separating Zones V and X.

The chart cutting attached shows the new areas.

6. Interchange of view as to the best means of protecting shipping in the
Mediterranean against submarines, escorts, patrols, and routes. Representatives should
be supplied with lists of places in the Mediterranean near the trade routes which are
protected against submarine attack.

As a result of the discussion the following decisions were arrived at:—

In the Western Basin of the Mediterranean it was agreed—

That the coastal route should be utilised as much as possible, and that each
country should decide as to whether their vessels should take the direct
route from Marseilles to Algiers, that is, by the route arranged by the French
Ministry of Marine.

That the question of protection with nets of certain ports should be looked into, and if
the British Government can spare any nets, they will communicate with the
Ministry of Marine at Paris and Rome as to where they would suggest these
nets being placed.

In the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean it was agreed—

To adopt the proposed French system of fixed routes, frequently changed, for
traffic to and from Salonica and the Ægean, and to adopt the proposed
English system of dispersion for traffic between Cape Bon and Port Said for
British vessels, and Allied vessels if desired.

That the British undertake to maintain the patrols on the French routes, and that
no patrol vessels will be diverted from these patrols for employment in
connection with the dispersed routes. After a period of trial, the working of
the two systems to be compared at a joint conference with a view to the
adoption of a permanent system.

General.

It was agreed that the British Admiralty should arrange for a representative to be
appointed on the staff of Rear-Admiral Fatou, and that, if possible, he should be
Captain G. B. Powell, formerly on the staff of Admiral Limpus. The further question
as to whether Admiral Fatou should be at Malta or at Bona will be investigated by
Admiral de Bon, and a further communication sent in due course.

It was agreed that stations for aircraft should be organised at Lampedusa and
Larsala (in Sicily), so that the French aircraft from Bizerta can utilise these places, and
consequently increase their radius of action. These sub-bases to be available for the
British aircraft from Malta, as also the British station at Malta to be available to
the French aircraft from Bizerta. Generally, that British or French aircraft should
use any of these stations as may be necessary.

[1365—90]
7. Provision of protection that can be given to the British drifters of the Otranto barrage.

With reference to paragraph 7, the Allied Delegates recognised that the means actually available for the Otranto barrage are not sufficient for the purpose. But since it has been suggested that for the more efficient organisation and the better defence of the drifters, it would be advisable to put this service under the command of a British naval officer, who would be under the orders of the Italian Commander-in-Chief; the Italian and French Delegates concur with this suggestion, and unanimously declare that they will place at the disposal of the British Commodore all the craft available in those waters which are not employed elsewhere.

The Italian Minister of Marine requests that the new appointment of the British Commodore should not take place before the 15th February next.

8. Question whether offensive operations in the Adriatic are possible, and, if so, their nature.

It was agreed that major naval operations in the Adriatic were not at present possible; but that minor operations should be carried out with vigour.

9. The need of paying off British battleships now employed in the Mediterranean, in order to provide crews for ships.

With reference to paragraph 9, the Italian Delegates have pointed out that the only enemy naval force to be confronted in the Mediterranean is the Austrian Fleet shut in the Adriatic, and that therefore it is necessary to have ready and concentrated at all times a superior fleet in opposition.

While this purpose was satisfactorily fulfilled by the Fleet concentrated in article 2 of the Naval Convention, the situation, as altered by the withdrawal of the "Queen" division, would be unfavourably changed—especially if account is taken of the losses sustained thus far by the Italian Navy.

Besides, military and political considerations demand that the Fleet should not only be ready to fight the Austrian Fleet, but also to prevent raids or other operations of any sort by naval detachments on the Italian coast.

For this second condition, naval forces have so far been successfully maintained at Venice, Brindisi, and Valona; and their continuous service has consequently entailed deterioration and losses amongst the torpedo and light craft.

For these reasons the withdrawal of the British Division should take place only if a substantial French naval force were permanently stationed at Corfu. The British Admiralty are to make every effort to reinforce the First Allied Squadron by a convenient number of light craft when available.

The Italian Delegates declare that should the Allies not take in consideration all these circumstances, the conditions on which the possibility is founded of continuing the effort to bring the war to a successful conclusion would be seriously compromised.

With reference to the Command of the Allied Naval Forces in the Adriatic, which it was understood was appertaining to the Italian Admiral, it has now been decided that such Command would be taken over by the French Commander-in-Chief in the eventuality of the greater part of the French Naval Forces in the Mediterranean taking part in operations in the Adriatic.

10. Anti-Submarine patrols off Ushant.

Report of Sub-Committee.

Vice-Admiral de Bon explained the French system of patrols, and stated that he hoped to be able to increase the number of trawlers and destroyers available.

Rear-Admiral Duff explained the British method and asked whether, if we were able to supply a mobile force of 12 trawlers to reinforce the patrols off Ushant when they were required, they could be based at Brest.

Vice-Admiral de Bon agreed to this proposition, and said it would be better to base them at Abenvrach, and that he would supply pilots from Brest.

The Chief of Staff suggested that this force should be free to act wherever the submarines were reported to be.

It was agreed that the officer in command of this force should keep complete control of them and act in conjunction with the naval authorities at Brest.
Vice-Admiral de Bon explained the system they have adopted for all French traffic, coming from the south and west, to make Belle Isle, where a depot of pilots has been established. In charge of a pilot, the ships then pass close along the coast to Cherbourg, where the pilots are disembarked. He suggested that our ships might also employ this route.

11. Conferences in Mediterranean.

It was agreed that more frequent conferences between the French, Italian, and British Admirals should take place in the Mediterranean, and Taranto was suggested as a suitable rendezvous for the purpose.