SECRET.

WAR CABINET, 59.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, on Friday, February 9, 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.

In attendance:
The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Minutes 8 to 11).
The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (Minutes 1 to 10).
General Sir W. Robertson, K.C.B., K.C.V.O., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Minutes 1 to 10).
The Right Hon. W. Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (Minute 14).
The Right Hon. the Lord Rhondda, President of the Local Government Board (Minute 14).
The Right Hon. J. Hope, M.P., Minister of Labour (Minute 14).
Mr. Neville Chamberlain, Director-General of National Service (Minute 14).
Major-General C. E. Callwell, C.B. (Minutes 8 to 10).
Commodore Lionel Halsey, C.B., C.M.G., Fourth Sea Lord (Minute 14).
The Right Hon. A. Chamberlain, M.P., Secretary of State for India (Minute 14).
The Right Hon. the Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P., Minister of Blockade (Minute 12).
The Right Hon. Sir J. Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (Minute 11).
Sir Arthur Thring, K.C.B., Parliamentary Counsel (Minute 14).
Major-General Sir Eric Campbell Geddes (Minutes 9, 10).

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Mr. G. M. Young, Assistant Secretary.
The Russian Conference.

1. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a telegram dated the 7th February, 1917, from General Sir Henry Wilson, reporting satisfactory progress with the Russian preparations, plans, and organisation.

The Arab Revolt.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that favourable reports had been received in regard to the Arab Revolt, including the blowing up, by the Sherif's own Bodyguard, of the Turkish barracks at Bab Kubah, at Medina.

Aircraft.

3. The War Cabinet approved the proposal of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to send two squadrons of night aeroplanes, with their specially trained pilots, to the Western Front. Hitherto these aeroplanes had been retained in this country for defence against Zeppelins.

Air Raid.

4. The First Sea Lord reported a successful air raid on Bruges.

Loss of the Destroyer "Ghurka."

5. The First Sea Lord reported the loss of the destroyer "Ghurka," which had struck a mine. Only five survivors had been brought in.

Loss of Transports.

6. The First Sea Lord reported the loss, in the same mine-field, of an empty transport, believed to be a small one. Three transports were reported overdue at Ottawa.

Submarines.

7. The First Sea Lord reported several actions with submarines. The losses on the previous day from submarines were as follows:

- British ships attacked and sunk—
  - Armed ... ... ... 5
  - Unarmed ... ... ... 3
  - Trawler ... ... ... 1

- British ships attacked and escaped—
  - Armed ... ... ... 1
  - Unarmed ... ... ... 1

Railways.

8. The War Cabinet approved that the War Office should have a representative on Mr. A. H. Illingworth's Interdepartmental Committee on Railway Arrangements in connection with a quicker unloading of ships.

The Secretary of State for War announced that he proposed to ask Mr. A. F. Pease to be the War Office representative (War Cabinet 50, Minute 10).

Railways in France.

9. Major-General Sir Eric Geddes made a statement to the War Cabinet on the subject of the unsatisfactory state of the railways in France, reporting that the railways were becoming exhausted in both men and material, and that even now the French Government were unable to carry out their undertakings in regard to agreed new construction which was essential to the proper service of the British armies. This is seriously handicapping the preparations of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force for the campaign of 1917. The gist of the statement is contained in a memorandum (Appendix I).
Sir Eric Geddes stated that although British army traffic was seriously restricted there was still a considerable amount of civilian traffic in our zone. The War Cabinet decided that—

The Foreign Office should make a strong representation to the French Government on the subject, pointing out that unless the French carried out their undertakings we could not guarantee to carry out the undertakings on which General Nivelle had laid so much stress at the London Conference on the 14th–16th January, and which had been strongly insisted on by M. Doumengue and Admiral Lacaze in their recent visits to London. These representations should be supported by a reasoned memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, which might be based partly on the statement from the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force called for at the previous Meeting (War Cabinet 57, Minute 3), and partly on information provided by Sir Eric Geddes.

10. With reference to the discussion on this subject on the previous day (War Cabinet 58, Minute 3), Major-General Sir Eric Geddes said that, as the result of the investigations into the development of railways to Taranto in connection with the transport of troops to the Balkans, he was satisfied that no immediate relief would be given to shipping by the diversion of iron ore to overland routes, owing to the serious shortage of rolling stock on the whole of the French railways.

11. The War Cabinet had a preliminary discussion on the question of the Shipping Controller’s powers.

The question was adjourned for further evidence.

12. In view of the possible serious and far-reaching consequences which might result from certain indiscreet parliamentary questions put to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in connection with the present position of the United States of America, the War Cabinet decided that—

It would be desirable, in principle, that the Speaker of the House of Commons should have a discretionary power of control over these and similar questions, and that the publication by the press of any question before it is on the Order Paper should be an offence.

They authorised Lord Robert Cecil to approach first Mr. Asquith and then the Speaker of the House of Commons on the subject and to report to the War Cabinet.

13. The War Cabinet had before them the correspondence printed in Appendix (II) with regard to the possibility of spreading epidemics by means of germs dropped from aircraft.

In view of the opinions of the experts of the Royal Society, War Office, and Local Government Board they considered that no further action was required.
14. (A.)—The War Cabinet approved the definition of the powers of the Director of National Service contained in the final paragraphs of his Second Report (War Cabinet 55, Appendix II).

(B.)—Mr. Henderson having reported that he had seen and approved the draft of a Bill for establishing a Ministry of National Service, the War Cabinet authorised him to proceed with it.

(Initialled) D. II G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
February 9, 1917.
RAILWAYS IN FRANCE.

Memorandum by Major-General Sir Eric Geddes*

THE Army Council has received a letter from the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief British Armies in France, acquainting them of the inability of the French railways to handle the total forecast traffic for the British armies in France. The tonnage which it was proposed to import into France for the use of the armies amounted to, roughly, 250,000 tons per week from the month of February, and in addition to this there would be, roughly, 100,000 tons a week locally-purchased traffic, making a total of 350,000 tons a week. It will be remembered that from the outbreak of the war the railway lines in France have been controlled and managed entirely by the French, who have discountenanced any association of the British armies in their management. The breakdown is in the railway service, and not in any service for which the actual responsibility of operation rests with the British armies.

Requests have been received from time to time from the French for assistance in rolling-stock, and meetings have taken place—notably from May to September last year—between representatives of the French and British armies and War Offices, at which a satisfactory conclusion was believed to have been reached. Up to that time no request for any general assistance had been put forward.

During the battle of the Somme it became evident that the French railways had reached the limit of their capacity, if indeed they had not exceeded it. An investigation was at the time being made, and estimates of the rolling-stock and locomotive requirements and of the demands to be made on the French railways for the spring offensive of 1917 were prepared and submitted to the French.

On the 11th November General Joffre asked Sir Douglas Haig for general assistance on the railways, and this was the first indication given by the French that they were not completely masters of the railway situation. But there was no admission of inability to deal with the required tonnages which were before the French in full at the time.

As a result of the investigations, and in consequence of representations made by Sir Douglas Haig, it was decided that considerable increase in capacity of lines and railway yards was necessary, and a programme of railway construction, which we were respectively to undertake, was agreed upon between ourselves and the French. It was also agreed that we should send out large quantities of rolling-stock and locomotives, and should undertake to create repair facilities in France. As the empty wagon supply was unsatisfactory and was not improving, and as some months would necessarily elapse before very large contributions from the British could possibly reach France, G.Q.G. was addressed by Sir Douglas Haig on the subject of rolling-stock supply. A reply to this communication was received dated the 29th December, when for the first time General Nivelle, who had just been appointed General Commanding-in-Chief, stated that it was impossible to expect any substantial improvement in the state of affairs until the rolling-stock was materially increased. Sir Douglas Haig consequently saw General Nivelle, and received verbal assurances that the needs of the British armies would be met, and it was on account of these assurances that special representations were recently made to the Cabinet for priority for shipping to France. On the 23rd January, at a conference about other matters between the Director-General of Transportation and the Directeur de l'Arrière at G.Q.G., the latter stated that he could see no hope of the French being able to handle a heavier traffic than was on that date being handled until the increased capacity of the line and the increase in locomotive power and rolling-stock arranged at the November and December conferences had reached fruition. This intimation was immediately followed by serious restriction of traffic generally, not only in the zone of the British armies, but in the zone of the French armies as well. The situation at that time was doubtless aggravated by the extreme cold, freezing of the waterways, and also by heavy coal and other special traffic. The Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief accordingly arranged a conference at G.Q.G. on the 29th January, when the
situation was discussed as a whole. The French then expressed their ability by special efforts to handle traffic on the scale of 200,000 tons import per week, plus approximately 100,000 tons of local traffic, and with that understanding the Commander-in-Chief in France decided that he could continue his projected plans. The French say that the breakdown is due to lack of capacity of lines, insufficiency of rolling-stock and locomotives, and generally to the exhaustion of the Nord Railway system. It is believed that the situation could be remedied by the steps which were decided upon at the November and December conferences, and the French state this to be the case. These steps were taken in hand promptly, and are being actively pursued, but they cannot possibly reach fruition for some time. The French have now for the first time permitted professional British operating officers to collaborate with the technical officers of the Nord in order to obtain the best possible service from the facilities available. They have asked for British assistance to construct lines which at the November and December Conferences they undertook to build as their proportion of the constructional programme then agreed upon, and an investigation is being carried out to see exactly what assistance they require to complete by a certain date. It is feared that these demands may make serious drafts upon the man-power available.

Since the meeting at G.Q.G. on the 29th January, when the assurances quoted above were given by the French, a letter has been received at G.H.Q. stating that the increase from (roughly) 150,000 tons a week to 200,000 tons a week import can only be attained gradually, and if certain constructional works are carried out for which the French ask British assistance. This matter is now the subject of correspondence between Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle, as it is a departure from the understanding arrived at on the 29th January at the G.Q.G. Conference. Until the position thus arising has been cleared up the situation must be a somewhat uncertain one.

It is believed that if the French can fulfil their undertaking of the 29th January the operations as forecast can take place, but if they are unable to do so modification of or postponement of the plans may be a necessary result.

February 8, 1917.

APPENDIX II.

DRIPPING OF GERMS FROM THE AIR.

(Report from the Chairman of Local Government Board.)

Dear Colonel Swinton,

January 29, 1917.

I ENCLOSE a note by Dr. A. Newsholme, C.B., Medical Officer of the Local Government Board, on the question raised in your letter of the 26th instant. As you will observe, my Department has been for a long while alive to the possibility of attempts being made to introduce disease into this country, but so far, I am glad to say, no evidence has reached us of any attempts having been made. I do not know whether Sir Arthur Davidson has anything beyond surmise to support his suspicion that such attempts may now be made by aircraft.

I have not asked Dr. Newsholme to offer any suggestions as to the method in which we could effect reprisals of a similar nature if attempts of the kind were made.

Yours very faithfully,

(Signed) RHONDDA.

Memorandum on Use of Bombs or Vessels containing Poisonous Germs by the Enemy.

1. The risk of aerial dissemination of disease germs from aeroplanes or Zeppelins has been previously considered by the Local Government Board. I advised in June 1915 that—

"aerial dissemination of disease may be dismissed as very unlikely to be "successful if attempted."
2. So far as I can ascertain there have been only two allegations of attempts in this direction. The first was published in the “Daily Chronicle” and “Times” of the 13th October, 1916, poisoned sweets and garlic saturated with cholera bacilli being stated to have been dropped at Constanza from enemy aeroplanes.

No confirmation of this statement has been received by the Board, and there is no evidence that cholera was caused by this agency.

3. It was stated in a letter to the Board that, according to information “from a reliable source,” infected sweetmeats had been dropped over Sheffield. On enquiry, no confirmation of this statement could be obtained.

4. I suggest the desirability of enquiries from Colonel Sir Arthur Davidson as to the facts and inferences which have led him to the conclusion that the dropping of “poisoned germs in bombs or vessels” is under contemplation, or is likely. I shall be glad to consider carefully any evidence on this point which may be forthcoming.

5. On the evidence so far available, I submit the following statements:

(a.) Spread of disease by means of disease germs dropped from aeroplanes is highly improbable. The production of human infection, when possible by such means, would necessarily be partial and casual, and could therefore be brought promptly within control, before it assumed epidemic proportions.

(b.) A possible exception to this statement is constituted by infection of public water supplies by the germs of cholera or typhoid fever. If infection of water supplies were contemplated, means other than projection of infectious material from aeroplanes would almost certainly be attempted by enemies in this country. The Board have gone thoroughly into this subject in its practical aspects. Infection of water supplies from the air may be dismissed as extremely improbable; and if it occurred, the routine precautions taken by responsible water authorities to protect water consumers would, as a rule, suffice to prevent serious spread of disease.

(c.) It is scarcely necessary to discuss separately the risk of spread of disease such as smallpox, plague, or anthrax, or foot and mouth disease in cattle, by aerial infection from aeroplanes.

There is a possibility of casual and localised infection, so far at least as smallpox is concerned; and possibly also of foot and mouth disease. Smallpox can be controlled at each place of origin, given prompt action; and its origin in the way contemplated must be regarded as a remote contingency.

(d.) Against the improbable dangers under consideration, I have not suggested precautionary measures beyond those already adopted. Under war conditions a remote danger must remain, which can only be met as it arises.

A. NEWSHOLME.

January 27, 1917.

DROPPING OF GERMS FROM THE AIR.

(Report from the Director-General, Army Medical Service.)

Dear Colonel Swinton,

January 31, 1917.

I got my experts together to discuss the question of poisonous germs being dropped from air-ships, &c., to our disadvantage, as also the question of preparing for reprisals. I enclose a copy of the Statement they have made on the subject.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) ALFRED KEOGH.
The enclosed letter (from Sir Arthur Davidson to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst) was considered at a Meeting of the Army Sanitary Committee this morning, when the Committee were assisted in their deliberations by:

- Major C. Andrewes, F.R.S.
- Dr. Morley Fletcher, F.R.S.
- Lieut.-Colonel D. Harvey, R.A.M.C.
- Lieut.-Colonel Sir Ronald Ross, K.C.B., F.R.S.
- Dr. Graham Smith, F.R.S.
- Lieut.-Colonel A. L. A. Webb, R.A.M.C.

The Meeting was of opinion that the danger of the introduction of disease in any proportion (which could not be readily dealt with under existing facilities), by means of germs dropped from aircraft, is so remote as to make it undesirable at this stage to divert the services of scientific men, which are fully occupied in other directions, to the previous preparation of possible retaliative measures. These it is thought would probably be readily improvisable at short notice should the necessity arise.

At the same time the Committee does not in any way wish to discourage the consideration of possibilities in the way of retaliatory measures, though it does not recommend that any considerable expenditure be at present incurred.

(Signed) E. GANN,
Secretary, Army Sanitary Committee.

January 31, 1917.

USE OF BOMBS CONTAINING POISONOUS GERMS BY ENEMY AND PROPOSED FORMS OF RETALIATION.

(Copy of Letter from Colonel Sir Arthur Davidson to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst.)

My dear Hardinge,

January 18, 1917.

I know you will not mind my writing to you on this question, and there is no need to answer this letter—I know how very busy you are.

From various things I have heard, or conclusions I have come to, I am pretty sure that the Germans, in their forthcoming “campaign of frightfulness” they intend against us, and which may begin now at any moment, are going to employ poison germs in the bombs or vessels they drop over here from their Halberstadt aeroplanes by day or from their Zeppelins by night.

Should this be carried out, there is only one thing to do, and that is to adopt instant reprisals and retaliation by bombing every important German open town we can get at.

Of course warn the German Government beforehand, but lose not one moment in adopting the retaliation after the first poison germs have been dropped here.

It is the only form of action the Germans understand or respect, or that influences them, but in order to carry it out all details must be decided beforehand. If there is any delay the question is discussed in the newspapers, every sort of religious, humanitarian, or future peace crank airs his views, and in the end we submit, as we have to the bombing of our open towns, to an outrage at the bidding of those who are not soldiers.

Do get this question debated and settled by the War Cabinet beforehand, so that when the moment comes we may not be caught unprepared, but may be able to act at once.

Yours, &c.

(Signed) ARTHUR DAVIDSON.

DROPPING OF GERMS FROM THE AIR.

(Report from the Royal Society’s War Committee.)

Sir,

Burlington House, Piccadilly, W., February 1, 1917.

Your letter (31/B/1) of the 25th January, with enclosure from Sir Arthur Davidson, relating to the contingency of the distribution of poison germs by aircraft, has been
referred to two of the Society's War Committees jointly, and their resolution on the subject is as follows:

"The Committee do not consider that the risk of any extensive outbreak of disease in this country could arise from the scattering of disease germs from hostile aircraft. Should local outbreaks of infection be thus produced, they could probably be dealt with by ordinary administrative means. It is not at present worth while to take scientific men from other and more important duties to devise methods of retaliation. A number of such means could be improvised by biological preparation in two or three weeks, if it should become necessary.

"The engineering problems connected with methods of distribution, in the event of retaliation appearing necessary or desirable, would probably involve about two months' work."

Notwithstanding the enclosed resolution, the questions raised will not be lost sight of by the Royal Society. Any important conclusion which may be reached after further consideration of every possibility will be communicated without delay.

We are, Sir,
Faithfully yours,
(Signed) A. SCHUSTER,
W. B. HARDY,
Secretaries of the
Royal Society.

The Secretary,
Committee of Imperial Defence,
2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.