WAR CABINET, 63.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, February 12, 1917, at 5 P.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.

In attendance:


The Right Hon. A. CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Secretary of State for India (for Minutes 11 to 13).

Major-General SIR H. V. COX, K.C.M.G., C.B., C.S.I., Military Secretary, India Office (for Minute 13).

SIR A. HERTZEL, K.C.B., India Office (for Minute 13).

The Right Hon. the EARL OF DERBY, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 10).


Lieutenant-General SIR H. E. BELFIELD, K.C.B., D.S.O., Director of Prisoners of War (for Minute 10).

The Right Hon. W. H. LONG, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minutes 11 and 12).

Mr. H. C. M. LAMBERT, C.B., Colonial Office (for Minutes 11 and 12).

Mr. L. OLIPHANT, Foreign Office (for Minute 13).

Mr. J. D. GREGORY, Foreign Office (for Minutes 11 and 12).

[1865—63] B
1. The First Sea Lord reported a doubtful action between a surface vessel and a submarine. He also stated that the losses from submarines for the twenty-four hours ending at noon on the 10th February were as follows:

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<th>Merchant-ships attacked and sunk</th>
<th>British merchant-ships attacked and escaped</th>
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<td>Merchant-ships</td>
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<td>Armed vessels</td>
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<td>Unarmed</td>
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<td>Neutrals</td>
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<td>Sailing vessels and trawlers</td>
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<td>Damaged by a mine</td>
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The losses for the twenty-four hours ending at noon on the 11th February were:

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<th>Merchant-ships attacked and sunk</th>
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In addition, one or two mine-sweeping trawlers had been sunk by mines, and an armed transport had been unsuccessfully attacked by a submarine in bright moonlight.

2. The First Sea Lord reported air raids on Ostend and Bruges.

3. The First Sea Lord reported that the French Government had protested against the publication by us of mercantile losses. The Secretary explained that the decision to allow publication of this information had, he believed, been made by the late Government on the ground that to withhold it might involve a panic, and, at any rate, would cause a loss of public confidence. The War Cabinet felt, however, that the present form of publication was unfortunate, as the newspapers, by means of headlines, created a false impression in regard to the extent of losses, particularly as these were published without relation to the number of ships entering and sailing from British ports every day. They inclined to the view that it would be preferable to suppress the full particulars given in the present daily statements, which included the names of the ships and their tonnage—information which could not fail to be of value to the enemy, and to assist him in the list of losses that he published.

The Admiralty were asked to consider a new form of publicity in regard to casualties.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the British losses in the recent successful operation on the Ancre, when 205 prisoners had been taken, were only 150, of whom 130 were wounded.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that portions of two additional German Cavalry Divisions had been identified on the Western Front, making an ascertained total of two, and a possible total of four additional Cavalry Divisions brought
over from the East during the last two months. This was in addition to five Divisions transferred across to the West during the same period.

6. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the Austrian Army on the Italian Front, having, as previously reported by him, been reinforced by two and a half Divisions, had attacked the Italians on Saturday, the 10th February, and had taken 1,000 prisoners. The fighting had, so far, gone slightly in favour of the enemy, but the Italians had ample forces on the spot.

German Reserves.

7. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff undertook to furnish to the War Cabinet a Memorandum regarding the existing German military reserves in men.

Iron Ore from Spain.

8. In regard to the conveyance of iron ore overland from Spain to France (War Cabinet, 58, Minute 3), the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that there was a break of gauge between the French and Spanish railways on the West side on the Spanish frontier. He undertook to make further enquiries into the matter of the possibility of rail transport, and, in conjunction with Lord Haldane, to draw up a draft telegram to our Minister in Spain, asking if Spain is in a position to furnish the necessary rolling-stock to carry the ore to and from the frontier. He also undertook to ascertain whether France could provide rail transport from the frontier.

The Command at Salonika.

9. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff brought to the notice of the War Cabinet a telegram from General Milne (Appendix I), and a letter of the 5th February to himself from the French Military Attache in London, dealing with the precise interpretation to be placed on the decision of the Rome Conference in regard to the relations between General Sarrail and the Generals commanding the forces of the different nationalities, as to which relations the British and French versions differed slightly. [The parallel records of the pertinent paragraph of the Rome Conference are given in Appendix II.]

The Secretary of State for War expressed dissent from the proposal to send a brigade to Petra. He considered that to do so would be to expose this brigade to grave risk, which might be avoided only by General Milne making a disposition of the force which was not in accordance with General Sarrail's orders, and which, if carried out contrary to those orders, would involve the brigade in operations in Greece outside the agreed theatre of war.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that, in view of the objections given by General Milne against sending the brigade to Petra (with which he agreed), and of the fact that the menace of a fresh attack was much less than it had been a few weeks previously, he was of opinion that the brigade ought not to be sent.

The War Cabinet decided that—

General Milne should comply with General Sarrail's order, and send the Brigade to Petra;

but they directed the Secretary of State for War—

To write to General Lyautey to point out that, although they had instructed General Milne to carry out the order given by General Sarrail, they desired at the same time to bring to the notice of General Lyautey that General Sarrail did
not appear to have given any reasons to General Milne for the move, nor to have taken the latter into his confidence to the extent due to the size of the force commanded by General Milne, and that they hoped he might give instructions accordingly.

Prisoners of War: Reprisals.

10. In reference to the Memorandum by the Adjutant-General, dated the 6th February (Appendix III), the War Cabinet authorised the War Office—

To take two German officer prisoners and treat them in exactly the same way as Captain Bate and Lieutenant Lamble were being treated in Germany, *i.e.*, to dress them in prison clothing and employ them in the usual tasks carried out in prison.

The War Cabinet further authorised—

That a communication that this had been done should be made to the German Government through the Netherlands Minister.

Japan and Shantung.

11. The War Cabinet considered the question of the Japanese claim to Shantung (War Cabinet, 51, Minute 6, and War Cabinet, 54, Minute 6), in the light of telegram No. 60 of the 27th January from Sir C. Greene, Tokyo (Appendix IV); the Memorandum by the Foreign Office, "The Japanese Claim to Inherit the German Rights in Shantung," dated the 2nd February, 1917; and the Memorandum by the First Sea Lord "Shantung Peninsula and Wei-Hai-Wei," dated the 6th February, 1917.

After discussion of the possible difficulties that might be created with the United States and our Allies by our acceding to the request of the Japanese Government, and the precise form which our reply should take, the War Cabinet decided that—

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should give an assurance in the terms suggested in the opening sentences of the original Japanese request of the 27th January, with the proviso that the Japanese Government should give a corresponding assurance of support, in the eventual peace settlement, to our claims to the German islands south of the Equator, and in our general policy elsewhere.

Japanese request for assurances as regards the future of the German Islands north of the Equator.

12. The Secretary of State for the Colonies explained that there was considerable anxiety in the Dominions lest the British Government should sacrifice the interests of the Dominions or give up their conquests for purely European objects. He added that our Oversea Dominions had no objection to the Japanese retaining their conquests if it was made clear that we intended on our part to retain ours, and that they would be satisfied if the assurance given to Japan safeguarded the British claim to the conquered German islands south of the Equator.
Southern Persia. 13. In reference to Minute 5 of the War Cabinet Meeting held on the 25th January (War Cabinet, 44, Minute 5), the Chief of the Imperial General Staff pointed out that the proposal for an officer to be placed in command of all the military forces in Southern Persia, including those at Bushire, acting under the Government of India, originated with him, and that he regarded it as a measure essential to the adequate prevention of enemy attempts to stir up trouble in Persia and on our Indian frontier. The Government of India were of the same opinion, and, apparently, so was His Majesty's Minister at Tehran. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff added that, if the proposal were not adopted, confusion, delay, and consequent inability to deal effectively with possible hostile attempts would certainly occur, if such attempts were made.

In view of the nature of the reply received from the Government of India (Appendix V), and that from the British Minister at Tehran to the request for their views as to the expediency under present conditions of entrusting the supervision of operations in Southern Persia to Sir Percy Sykes, the War Cabinet decided that—

The existing situation in Southern Persia, and the dangers which might be apprehended from German and Turkish intrigue in these regions, particularly in view of the military situation in Mesopotamia and Turkey-in-Asia, did not call for the replacement of Sir Percy Sykes by a General Officer to command all the forces in Southern Persia, but that the situation would be adequately met by the retention of Sir Percy Sykes as Political Officer, and by attaching to him as Military Adviser an officer with military experience. No control would be exercised by this officer over the forces at Bushire, and Sir Percy Sykes' relations to His Majesty's Minister at Tehran would remain unchanged.

The Secretary of State for India to communicate this decision to the Government of India, and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to communicate it to the British Minister at Tehran.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
February 13, 1917.

[Handwritten] D. L. G.
APPENDIX I.

Telegram from the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Salonica, to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

G.C. 604.

THE brigade at Katerini being urgently required on my front, I asked Sarrail this morning if he had any objection to my bringing it back. To-night I received an order to move the brigade to Petra, on the road to Elasona, and to hold the defile at that place. To do this effectively, it will be necessary to hold the pass much further to the south-west. In accordance with the terms of 27875 cipher of the 13th January from Secretary of State for War, I desire to protest against this order. The whole line from the sea to the Vardar is being held by the British army, while Sarrail has fifteen divisions west of the Vardar. I experience great difficulty in relieving my troops in the front line, and shall have very great difficulty in feeding troops at Petra. I consider, moreover, that the sanction of His Majesty's Government is required for a move south, even within the neutral zone. As, since his return from the Rome Conference, Sarrail gives me no information of his plans, I cannot understand what his intention is. Trusting that you will press for the return of British brigade from Katerini, where it was sent when the French had no troops available and the situation seemed threatening. Three French divisions have arrived since that time. In my opinion, the situation on my front does not justify my only reserve being so far away, nor do I think that the move is necessitated by the situation in Greece. Trust I may receive an early reply.

February 10, 1917.

APPENDIX II.


6. Les Gouvernements représentés à la Conférence ont approuvé qu’à l’avenir les relations entre le Commandant en chef des Armées alliées en Orient et les Généraux qui commandent les forces des différentes nationalités doivent être basées sur les mêmes principes qui ont régis les relations entre le Commandant en chef britannique et le Commandant des forces françaises dans l’expédition de Gallipoli, c’est-à-dire que le Commandant de chacune des forces alliées doit se ranger aux ordres du Commandant en chef pour ce qui concerne les opérations militaires, en conservant le droit de communication et d’information directe avec son propre Gouvernement.

6. The Governments represented at the Conference approved that in future the relations between the Commander-in-chief of the Allied Army of the East and the Generals Commanding the Forces of the different nationalities should be based on the principles which governed the relations between the British Commander-in-chief and the Commander of the French Forces in the Gallipoli Expedition, that is to say, the Commander of each of the Allied Forces shall comply with the orders of the Commander-in-chief as regards military operations, subject to the right of direct communication with, and reference to, his own Government.
APPENDIX III.

Reprisals on Officers Alleged to be in Possession of Soft-Nosed Bullets.

Memorandum by the Adjutant-General.

PATZEL, a German Feldwebel, was convicted by a Field General Court-Martial in the Cameroons in October 1915 for having hollow-nosed and cut bullets in his possession, and sentenced to death. This was commuted to twenty years’ penal servitude.

He is serving his sentence at Maidstone.

Germany called on us to revise these proceedings, as, according to the orders of the German officer in command of the Cameroon Forces, such bullets were only to be used for the purpose of killing game, and they put forward a statement made by a repatriated soldier who had been with Patzel, suggesting that these orders were strictly carried out.

To this we replied that the man had been rightly convicted.

Germany returned to the charge, and, in the meantime, has imprisoned two of our officers—Captain Bate, Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, and Lieutenant Lamble, R.N.R.—both of whom were taken prisoners on the “Appam” by the “Moewe,” in circumstances of great indignity. They have clothed them in the dress worn by German military prisoners and confined them in ordinary cells, where they are employed in making sacks. Proceedings for having dum-dum bullets in their luggage are threatened.

I strongly urge that reprisals should be taken against two selected German officers to counteract the action taken by the Germans in regard to Captain Bate and Lieutenant Lamble. In the case of Patzel, the hollow-nosed and cut bullets were in his possession, whereas in the case of the two British officers, who were coming home from West Africa when captured by the “Moewe,” the bullets are said to have been in their luggage; but of that we have no proof. In any case, they had been serving in West Africa, and if these bullets were in their possession, the chances are that they had them for sporting purposes.

I suggest that we should take two German officers and treat them in exactly the same way as Captain Bate and Lieutenant Lamble are being treated, viz., put them in prison clothing and employ them on the usual prison tasks. Should the Germans take proceedings against our officers for having dum-dum bullets in their luggage and sentence them to death, I suggest that we should tell them that, in the event of the officers being executed, we shall execute the two German officers.

Unless we take a firm line in regard to prisoners, I feel sure that our prisoners in Germany will only suffer more than at present, and the Germans will take every advantage of what they will consider our weakness rather than our humanity.

(Initialled) C. F. M., A.-G.

February 6, 1917.

APPENDIX IV.

Paraphrase of Telegram No. 60, dated the 27th January, from Sir C. Greene, Tokyo.

SIR C. GREENE stated that the Minister for Foreign Affairs had referred to the desire for naval assistance expressed by His Majesty’s Government, and had said that it would be much easier for him to persuade the Cabinet and the Naval General Staff to agree to our proposal for an extension of the sphere of Japanese naval help if he were in a position to quote our willingness to give the assurance in question now; his position in the Cabinet also would be strengthened, which would be advantageous to the Allies.

From this it was evident that, as Sir C. Greene had foreseen, and as had been the case in the spring of 1916, the Japanese wished to exploit our request for extended co-operation in order to do a political deal with us. At the same time their request was not
a new one. In December 1914 (Sir C. Greene's telegrams Nos. 242 and 261) they had made a similar claim regarding German islands north of the Equator, which was at present their chief interest in the division of the spoils; presumably the only difference was that they ask for an assurance of our support at the present time instead of at the end of hostilities. To this end they instanced the precedent of Russia and Italy, and claimed like treatment for themselves.

Sir C. Greene was unaware of the views of His Majesty's Government as to the future of the islands, or of the diplomatic and strategic problems which their eventual possession of by Japan might raise with America or Australia. But, from the point of view of our relations with Japan, he had been and was inclined to believe that we should do well to give the desired assurance. Japan was practically in possession of the islands, and if she declined eventually to give them up we should either have to use force or to offer her some compensation, which might be more onerous than acquiescence at the present time. Before her participation in the war Japan expected some reward, and the reversion of these islands would go far to meet this expectation. In the circumstances it seemed that, if His Majesty's Government could give the desired assurance at once, the relations between Japanese Government and themselves would be strengthened, as well as the position of the Minister for Foreign Affairs himself, who was anxious to help the Allied cause.

He could not believe that the Japanese Government would hesitate to grant naval assistance, but it would make all the difference if this were to be granted in response to a friendly action on our part, not merely as a transaction on a pecuniary basis.

He thought that we might accompany our assurance by the expression of a hope that our acquiescence might lead to the whole-hearted participation of Japan in their naval and wider field of co-operation. In such a case he imagined that the Japanese Government would hardly insist upon the money demand alluded to in his telegram No. 40.

APPENDIX V.

From Secretary of State to Viceroy, Army Department, January 25, 1917.

3434. Your telegram 940 of 21st January. Immediate despatch of proposed reinforcements approved. Presumed that the officers and instructors mentioned were asked for by Sykes for South Persian Rifles, and will be required for that purpose whatever our decision as to military control and appointment of General may be. This question is reserved by War Cabinet for further consideration after receiving replies from you and Marling to questions which will be sent in another telegram.

From Secretary of State to Viceroy, January 30, 1917.

3436. Your telegram No. 940 and Marling's telegram No. 30 of the 23rd January (situation in South-West Persia). War Cabinet have again had question under consideration, especially with reference to the two above-mentioned telegrams.

From such information as is in their possession they are not at present convinced that there is grave or imminent danger of any strong Turkish advance into the interior of Persia whereby situation in Fars would be seriously compromised in the near future. They realise, however, that it is desirable that the position of the South Persian Rifles at Shiraz should be rendered more secure. For this purpose the Government of India have been instructed to send immediately the reinforcements mentioned in the last paragraph of Viceroy's telegram, which will number approximately 1,000 men together with the 10 officers and 53 British instructors, provided that Sir P. Sykes desires and has asked for the latter for the training of the South Persian Rifles.

As regards the position of Sir P. Sykes, War Cabinet feel great hesitation in superseding him by a General of the active Army: in the first place, he is an officer with very exceptional knowledge of Persia, he is persona grata to the Governor-General of Persia, and to Persians generally, while such a change would affect Sir P. Sykes' personal position so injuriously that it is hardly likely that he would
consent to remain as Chief Political Officer to the General in question; and secondly, such an appointment might, they feel, give to the South Persian Rifles, and, indeed, the whole situation, a military appearance, which might justly excite the suspicions of the Persian Government and constitute a perhaps inconvenient precedent for similar action elsewhere. The above might perhaps hold good were we to insist on the appointment of a General even nominally under Persian control.

I should be glad to know your views upon preceding considerations.

NOTE.—Similar telegram addressed by Foreign Office to Sir C. Marling, Tehran, as No. 55 of 29th January, 1917.

From Viceroy, Army Department, February 6, 1917.
(Repeated to Tehran.)


Whilst agreeing that there is at present no imminent danger of a hostile advance through Persia, we made our proposals with a view to safeguarding ourselves in the most efficient manner against the possibility of such a movement. At the same time, in your 3431, you stated that the War Cabinet were of opinion that operations around Shiraz had assumed a military character. We agree in this view, which is fully confirmed by current events. On the suggestion of the War Cabinet, we proposed the command being exercised by a military officer appointed by us who, in view of the responsibility involved, should undoubtedly hold General’s rank.

We recognise Sykes’ political qualifications, and we consider that he conducted his mission successfully up to the date of his arrival at Shiraz. But, having regard to present circumstances, we think that his military knowledge is not sufficient to enable us to rely upon him to deal adequately with the local military situation. We must add as regards organisation of the South Persian Rifles, which in our opinion is the most important factor in the maintenance of our position in Southern Persia, Sykes has shown a lack of organisating capacity which prevents us from proposing his retention. We recognise that Sykes might not like the position of Chief Political Officer, and it was for this reason that we suggested Gough as his successor. We agree that Persian susceptibilities should be disturbed as little as possible, but we feel strongly that the necessities of the military position are paramount, and that we require a free hand to control this force for which we are now paying, and which is intended for the protection of Persian interests and the maintenance of Persian authority.

As this force is dependent on India for reinforcements, supplies, and munitions, dual control seems to us unavoidable unless we also control its operations, and in our 940 of 20th January we emphasised the importance of avoiding anything in the nature of dual control.