WAR CABINET, 107.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, March 28, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The Prime Minister (in the Chair).

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

The Right Hon. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.

The following were also present—

The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 9).


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

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

1. The First Sea Lord reported that the destroyer “Tempest” had been damaged in a collision with a submarine.

2. The First Sea Lord reported that the loss of the destroyer “Myrmidon” was due to a collision with a collier.

3. The First Sea Lord reported an action with an enemy submarine, and gave his usual statement of mercantile casualties.
4. In continuation of the discussion on the 26th March (War Cabinet, 104, Minute 14), Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone gave his views on the question of invasion. After recalling that he had formerly been a strong disbeliever in the practicability of invasion, Lord Fisher gave the following reasons for believing that invasion was now feasible:

(a.) His diminished confidence, owing to the withdrawal from the command of the Grand Fleet of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, whom, without disparaging Admiral Sir David Beatty, he had always regarded as the best man and exceptionally qualified for the post, and whom he himself, when in office, had for many years designated as Admiralissimo in time of war.

(b.) The increasing German submarine menace; the numbers of enemy submarines, he pointed out, were now very large, and their seaking qualities were increased.

(c.) The demonstration at Gallipoli of the practicability, not only of landing in the face of fire, but of maintaining the expedition on beaches which were under continuous fire.

(d.) The fact that the German Fleet is under the higher command of a military officer, namely, Field-Marshall Hindenburg. He pointed out that a military officer might order the Fleet to take risks which no naval officer would contemplate, and instanced the case of Villeneuve being ordered to sea by Napoleon.

(e.) The risks to the Grand Fleet from mines and submarines in its passage to the vicinity of the landing-places.

(f.) The recent increase in the size of the German Army, which rendered the requisite number of troops available.

(g.) The fact that ample transport is available, 45 per cent. of the German mercantile marine being at Hamburg and Bremen, as well as small craft at Emden, suitable for disembarkation purposes.

In view of the above circumstances, Lord Fisher stated that he had felt bound to lay before the Prime Minister his views, namely, that invasion was now feasible.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, while not denying the feasibility of an actual landing, stated that the Joint Conference had been much influenced by the consideration that the enemy would not be able to maintain his communications, and that he would like to hear Lord Fisher's opinion on this point.

Lord Fisher considered that the danger of invasion was understated by the following summary of the views of experts, contained in War Cabinet, 104, Minute 14:

"The general view of the experts present at the War Cabinet was that, whilst an attempt at invasion could not be ruled out as absolutely impossible, it was extremely unlikely that the enemy would attempt it, or carry it to a successful conclusion."

He pointed out that the impossibility of maintaining surface craft in particular localities for any length of time under modern conditions increased the difficulty of any permanent interruption of the lines of communications. Apart from the return of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe to the command of the Grand Fleet, Lord Fisher stated that without full information of the Admiralty's existing dispositions he could offer no suggestion for dealing with this menace.

The War Cabinet thanked Lord Fisher for the statement of his views, and undertook to give them careful consideration in their examination of the problem of Home Defence.
5. The War Cabinet pressed Lord Fisher more particularly in regard to a statement in his letter to the First Lord, dated the 1st February, 1917, to the effect that he had given Admiral Jellicoe "a plan for dealing effectively with the German submarine menace." Lord Fisher stated that these words referred to his having offered to serve under Sir John Jellicoe as Controller of the Navy, in order to provide more effectually than at present all the apparatus requisite to subdue the German submarine menace. He referred to a very secret device, which the Admiralty have already mentioned to the War Cabinet, and on which four separate and independent investigators are at work.

Lord Fisher suggested that the number of these instruments ordered was insufficient.

The First Sea Lord stated that 750 sets of one type had been ordered, but Lord Fisher suggested that sufficient sets of the best type had not been ordered.

The representatives of the Admiralty stated that the Board of Invention and Research had not recommended the adoption for general use of the type referred to by Lord Fisher, but that 100 sets had been ordered for experimental purposes on the recommendation of the Board of Invention and Research.

Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Peirse, the Vice-Chairman of the Board of Invention and Research, stated, however, that the Board of Invention and Research had not considered that recommendations for the adoption of any particular apparatus for general use came within their functions. This came rather within the province of the Admiralty Representatives on the Board of Invention and Research.

Rear-Admiral Duff, the Director of Anti-Submarine Warfare, gave a full résumé of the orders given for anti-submarine devices of the nature referred to. It transpired that 750 sets of one type of the device had been ordered, and that 2,400 of a different type were already in use afloat.

Without making any observations on the attitude of the Admiralty towards this particular device, the War Cabinet took particular note of the agreement among the experts that at present the particular device referred to by Lord Fisher, though promising, did not provide any immediate solution of the submarine problem, and could not be looked upon as other than a part of the system employed for the destruction of submarines. Lord Fisher referred to a Memorandum by his scientific colleagues which, as they felt strongly on the subject, he stated he would forward to the Prime Minister.

6. With reference to War Cabinet, 91, Minute 7, the First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that he now had received further information in regard to Mr. Edison's reported submarine detector, and had ascertained that it was a signalling apparatus with the capabilities of which the Admiralty were fully acquainted, and which had been in use in the Navy for some years.

7. The First Sea Lord read a telegram from Russia in regard to the state of the Russian Baltic Fleet, containing particulars of very serious disorders, and indicating that, whilst the situation at Helsingfors was fairly normal, the state of affairs at Kronstadt was unsatisfactory, though improving, and, generally speaking, the discipline in the Baltic Fleet had weakened considerably.
8. The War Cabinet had a preliminary discussion on the subject of a Memorandum by General Alexeieff, forwarded by General Hanbury-Williams (Appendix I).

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had only just received this communication, and, before giving his considered view in regard to it, he would like to communicate with Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and General Nivelle. In the meantime, as a preliminary expression of opinion, he considered that we should make no material alterations in our plans as regards the Western Front. He had, however, already communicated with General Alexieff in regard to the great importance of avoiding any delay in the Russian operations in the Caucasus, as such delay might react seriously on our position in Mesopotamia.

While, therefore, deferring further consideration of this question, the War Cabinet note that the decisions of the Petrograd Conference are completely upset.

9. With reference to War Cabinet, 104, Minute 5, Mr. Henderson reported that Mr. Thomas would not be able to go to Russia. He believed that Mr. Thorne and Mr. O’Grady would be willing to accompany the deputation, and he hoped that Lieutenant Sanders might also be available, which the Secretary of State for War stated would be practicable.

The general view of the War Cabinet was in favour of a reliable Russian Socialist being attached to the Mission as an interpreter, and of the addition of a more academic Socialist of the type of Mr. Hyndman.

10. The War Cabinet had under consideration the Report of Lord Derby’s Committee (G.T.-266, Appendix II) on the Exchange of Prisoners of War, prepared in accordance with War Cabinet, 95, Minute 1, and decided that—

(a.) A general exchange of interned civilians was impracticable and not in the interests of the State.

(b.) The Secretary of State for War should take the necessary steps, in conjunction with the Foreign Office, to ascertain the views of the French Government on the proposal that officers and men who had been in captivity for two years or more should be interned in Switzerland or some other neutral State.

(c.) The Secretary of State for War, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and the Admiralty should take the requisite action to give effect to the proposals of Lord Derby’s Committee with regard to the question of effecting an exchange of British and Indian prisoners of war for Turkish.

(d.) The question of the employment of prisoners of war and the publication of the facts relating to the imprisonment of two German Officers should be deferred for consideration at a later date.

(Initialled) D. Ld. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
March 23, 1917.
From General Hanbury Williams to C.I C.S., March 26, 1917.

FOLLOWING is complete translation of memorandum referred to in my 914:

"Presenting my respects to the representative of British Military Mission at Russian G.H.Q., I regard it as my conscientious duty, in order to avoid the serious consequences which might arise from the omission to express frankly my opinion of the possibility of fulfilling decisions arrived at in the course of the Petrograd Conference:

"First, letter just received from the Minister of War points out that the interior political commotions have had a serious effect on the condition of our reserve (depôt) units throughout the entire country. They are in a state of moral confusion, and cannot be employed as reinforcements for three or four months, that is, earlier June-July.

"Second, the same causes and effects bear equal relation to the cavalry of the whole army.

"Above situation necessitates looking facts straight in the eyes, and stating with complete frankness that we cannot assume the offensive here at the commencement of May (old style), and can count upon participation on a large scale only in June-July. Position allows to the enemy the possibility of concentrating all his reserves on the French front, or with greatly increased [? group omitted] to fall upon us, profiting by our temporary period of weakness. Circumstances should, I think, entail certain alterations in consideration of operations in the near future, and influence decisions arrived at at the Petrograd Conference.

"In particular must be considered General Nivelle's communication, dated the 16th March, that he will employ the whole strength of the French Armies for an offensive on the West front, in order to obtain a definite result.

"Obligatory and unavoidable (for their preservation for the future) inactivity of the Russian Armies in the next few months, in my opinion, calls for French Army not to be exhausted, and for its reserves to be kept until compatible with the time when, with joint forces, we shall be in a position to attack enemy on all fronts.

"Sixth, I think also that it would be more expedient, under the circumstances of our enforced inaction, that the British-French Armies at least should follow up enemy's retreat slowly and prudently, and should also occupy new and strong lines of defence. This does not refer to decisive attack by British-French Armies on enemy in retreat on strongly fortified lines, perhaps intending some large manoeuvre in open warfare, where freedom of movement of reserves might give a favourable opportunity to one side or the other.

"But in such an operation, enemy, who is based on prepared, strongly fortified positions, would possess an undoubted advantage."
APPENDIX II.

PRISONERS OF WAR SUB-COMMITTEE.

Minutes of a Meeting held at the War Office on Friday, March 16, 1917, at 4.30 p.m.

Present:

The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. Lord Newton, Director of Prisoners Department.

Mr. J. F. Hope, M.P., Chairman of the Prisoners of War Employment Committee.


Brigadier-General C. K. Cockerill, C.B., Sub-Director of Military Intelligence, War Office.

Major C. L. Storr, Secretary.

IN accordance with War Cabinet instructions (War Cabinet, 95, Minute 1), the Committee assembled to consider the following questions:

(a.) The exchange of British and German interned civilians.
(b.) The employment of prisoners of war.

1. The Committee had before them a Memorandum by Lord Newton, dated the 3rd March, 1917 (G.T.-92 (Annexe A)), in which it was pointed out that there were interned in Germany approximately 4,500 British civilians, whereas there were in the British Empire about 36,000 Germans, 30,000 of whom were of military age; that a formidable agitation was in progress in Great Britain to secure a general exchange of these civilians; that the only justification for an exchange of so disproportionate a nature rested upon humanitarian grounds; that there was reason to believe that statements regarding conditions at Ruhleben were greatly exaggerated, and that, even if the disparity in numbers were reduced by the addition of French civilians, the difficulties of transporting the many thousands of Germans by sea would remain almost insuperable.

The Committee were unanimously of the opinion that—

1. Any increase of the resources in man-power of the Central Powers must tend to prolong the War, and that as the War is to a great extent one of attrition, the best and really most humane course to follow is to place and keep out of action as many of the enemy as possible.

2. Taking all the circumstances into consideration, and more especially in view of the disparity of the numbers involved, the proposal of a general exchange of interned civilians should not, in the interests of the State, be entertained, and they should report to the War Cabinet accordingly.

2. The Committee further considered a suggestion that endeavours should be made through diplomatic channels to effect an arrangement with the German Government whereby officers and men who have been in captivity for over two years, might be interned in Switzerland or in some other neutral country.

The Committee took into consideration the following points:

(a.) That under existing conditions the Swiss Government would not be prepared to accommodate more than a limited number of such prisoners of both nationalities.

(b.) That we have undertaken to waive any claim on Norway for such purposes in favour of Russia.
The Committee recommended that—

(1.) The War Office should designate what neutral countries were open to least objection for this purpose.

(2.) If the War Cabinet approve the suggestion in principle, the views of the French Government should, in the first instance, be ascertained.

3. The Committee considered the question of effecting an exchange of British and Indian Prisoners of War for Turkish.

The Committee recommended that—

(1.) The Turkish Government be invited through the proper channels to come to a mutual arrangement with His Majesty's Government for the exchange of 600 prisoners on each side as a preliminary to a wider exchange.

(2.) The selection of the men to be exchanged should be left to the captor Government.

(3.) Officers and men, both of British and Indian nationality, in strict proportion to their relative numbers, should be included under the terms of the exchange.

(4.) The Admiralty be asked to report if, and when, shipping could be provided for the conveyance of the prisoners.

(5.) The proposal should be for unconditional repatriation, and not for internment.

(6.) If the War Cabinet approve the proposal, the Russian Government should be informed of the action taken.

4. The Committee examined the question of the employment of Prisoners of War. They had before them a letter (G.T.-81) (Annexure B) dated the 20th January, 1917, from the Secretary to the Prisoners of War Employment Committee to the Secretary to the War Cabinet, which stated that the number of such prisoners applied for by Government Departments alone already far exceeds the available supply, and which suggested that—

Prisoners of war, especially those skilled in agriculture and engineering, should, if possible, be released from France for work in the United Kingdom, their places in France being taken by Turkish prisoners of war now in Egypt.

After due consideration, the Committee decided that there were many difficulties in the way of carrying into effect the above proposal, and that no material advantages were likely to be gained by its adoption.

5. The Committee considered the suggestion that Schleswig-Holstein deserters from the German Army, of whom there were about 7,000 in Denmark, might be conveyed to and employed in the United Kingdom. It was understood that the Danish authorities favoured the proposal.

The Committee decided that—

Mr. Hope, M.P., Chairman of the Prisoners of War Employment Committee, should take up the question in consultation with the Home Department and Foreign Office.

6. The Committee also considered a suggestion that the facts relating to the imprisonment of two German officers in retaliation for the imprisonment of two British officers—Lieutenant Lamble and Lieutenant Bate—should be published, and Lord Derby undertook to bring the suggestion before the War Cabinet.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
March 16, 1917.

(Initialled) D.