SECRET.

WAR CABINET, 110.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, April 2, 1917, at 12 noon.

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. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.

The following were also present:—


The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1, 2, 3, and 4).

General Sir W. R. Robertson, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1, 2, 3, and 4).

The Right Hon. A. Chamberlain, M.P., Secretary of State for India (for Minute 5).


The Right Hon. W. Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minute 5).

Mr. H. C. M. Lambert, C.B., Colonial Office (for Minute 5).

The Right Hon. Sir Albert Stanley, M.P., President of the Board of Trade (for Minute 5).

The Right Hon. J. Hodge, Minister of Labour (for Minute 10).

The Right Hon. Sir R. Chalmers, G.C.B., Treasury (for Minute 5).

Sir John Bradbury, K.C.B., Treasury (for Minute 5).


Colonel E. D. Swinton, C.B., D.S.O., Assistant Secretary.

Sweden.

1. THE Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs read a letter from Lord Robert Cecil (Appendix I), pointing out the dangerous and reactionary tendencies of recent Swedish political changes. Mr. Balfour rather inclined to the view that the adverse feature mentioned in Lord Robert Cecil's letter might be counterbalanced to a certain extent by the good effects of the announcement of a Finnish Constitution:—

The War Cabinet were unable to suggest any action at the present stage, beyond keeping careful observation on the situation in Sweden.
2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that a Turkish Division was still at or in the neighbourhood of Medina, and that, owing to the operations of the Arabs against the railways, it appeared doubtful whether it would be able to get away.

Mesopotamia.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that, in the recent action on the Diala River, our forces had sustained total casualties of 450, including 48 killed. The British troops were now about 40 miles from Khanikir, and the Russians, having captured the important Miantak Pass, were about 50 miles from that place. He anticipated, owing to the slow rate of advance of the Russians, that the Turkish force retiring in front of them would probably escape; they were, however, known to be short of supplies and would probably be glad to escape northwards.

Egypt.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff gave the full details of the battle on the 26th-28th March between the British force and the Turks near Gaza, the greater part of which were to be published. The objectives had been Gaza and Wadi-el-Ghuze, in order to prevent the Turks escaping without being brought to action; and, if possible, to seize Gaza by a coup de main. Our losses had amounted to 47 officers and 350 men killed, 2,900 of all ranks wounded, and about 200 missing.

Resolutions by the Board of Trade.

5. The War Cabinet had before them certain resolutions on the question of the control of export and import trade after the War (Appendix II), which the President of the Board of Trade proposed, on behalf of the British Government, to lay before the Imperial War Conference that afternoon.

Having regard to the very short time that they had had at their disposal for the study of the questions involved, the War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) These resolutions should not be presented to the Imperial War Conference until the members of the War Cabinet had had further time for their consideration, and that the action in the matter of the Imperial War Conference sitting in the afternoon (2nd April) should be limited to discussion;

(b.) The resolutions, subject to the omission of (c), sub-paragraph ii, and to such amendments as might be determined on by the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the President of the Board of Trade, should be presented to the Imperial War Conference at its sitting on Wednesday, the 4th April, if, in the meantime, no member of the War Cabinet raised any point in them for discussion.

Hospital Ships.

6. The First Sea Lord reported that another hospital ship, the "Gloucester Castle," had been damaged and beached, and that it was not known whether the injury was caused by mine or submarine.

The further consideration of this matter, in reference to the question of reprisals, was adjourned for the meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet on Tuesday, the 3rd April, when the Report of Lord Curzon's Committee upon the policy of reprisals would be available.

Submarines.

7. The First Sea Lord reported an action between a "Q" trawler and an enemy submarine with results that seemed promising, as well as three actions between "Q" ships and enemy submarines,
which had involved some loss of life and damage to two British ships. Two of the British vessels, “Q-7” and “Q-36,” had been brought in. He pointed out that the experience of some of our own submarines which had been shelled pointed to the fact that unless these vessels were hit at very short range they had a very good chance of escaping being sunk. He also reported serious marine casualties inflicted by submarines and raiders.

8. The First Sea Lord read three telegrams from Russia indicating a continuance of the serious situation in regard to the discipline of the Russian Baltic Fleet and reporting the removal, for political reasons, of some of the most efficient Russian officers from ports in the White Sea.

Shipping Losses.

9. The War Cabinet had some discussion on the question of shipping losses, which were reaching most serious proportions.

The First Sea Lord stated that he was in communication with the Shipping Controller on the subject of the desirability of building more and smaller merchant ships in those cases in which new vessels had not yet been actually laid down, in order to compel the enemy to expend as many torpedoes as possible in his submarine campaign. He further expressed some misgivings as to whether the crews obtained from the mercantile marine would continue to face the risks, which were increasing every day, owing to the greater distances at which the submarines were able to operate.

The view of the War Cabinet was that if such a situation arose (of which there was at the moment no indication), some form of compulsion for marine service might be necessary.

The Barrow Strike.

10. The Minister of Labour reported that, all negotiations for the settlement of the Barrow strike having failed, he had decided, as the result of a Conference held on the same morning, that the time had come to take action for the arrest, under Regulation 42 of the Defence of the Realm Act, of the ringleaders concerned. He therefore proposed to issue at once a Proclamation. If this did not bring about a cessation of the strike within twenty-four hours, all the members of the Shop Committee responsible for organising the strike (numbering some twenty to thirty men) should be arrested and tried. The Law Officers of the Crown supported the decision that action should be taken under Regulation 42 of the Defence of the Realm Act.

While recognising the risk of an extension of the movement, the War Cabinet saw no alternative to the action proposed, and decided that—

A Proclamation, calling on the Barrow workmen to return to work within twenty-four hours, should be issued that afternoon (2nd April).

If the men did not return, the Shop Stewards who brought the men out on strike should be arrested under Regulation 42 of the Defence of the Realm Act for the impeding of the production of war material.

When the men had returned, negotiations should at once be opened for settling their grievance as to piece-rates.

It was noted that the Minister of Labour had offered settlement with retrospective payment, and that the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Employers' Federation had also tried to bring about a settlement.

(Initialled) D. LI. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 2, 1917.
APPENDIX I.

My dear Arthur,

April 1, 1917.

I am rather disturbed about Sweden, though Howard takes it calmly—after his manner. The new Government seems to me almost as bad as it can be. The Prime Minister is a pro-German banker—a rival of the Wallenbergs—who was one of the promoters of the loan to Germany about a year ago. Lindman, the Foreign Minister, was one of the Swedish delegates in the Anglo-Swedish negotiations of 1915, and was then thought to be strongly anti-British. He inspires one of the most violent Activist papers in Stockholm. Akerman, the Minister of War, is said to be a decided Activist. All this, taken in connection with the recent reports by Andersen and the King of Denmark of the pro-German utterances of the King of Sweden, and the presence of the Queen in Berlin, seems to me to make an attempt at a coup d'état not wholly impossible. The King was said to believe that the U-boat campaign was bound to succeed, and no Swedish shipping has moved between here and Sweden for the last two months. The alarmist speeches here have no doubt increased this impression. Against all this is the fact that we have kept the Swedes very short for months, and they are said to be now in want of cereals. Some people say, however, that they could just get on without imports.

I do not know if the War Cabinet should be informed of all this, in case they can think of any military or naval precautions which should be taken. Military action might take the form of pressure on Norway to send sulphur, copper, fish to Germany.

Yours ever,

ROBERT CECIL.

APPENDIX II.

Draft Resolutions on the subject of Import and Export proposed by the President of the Board of Trade.

(Arising out of the Board of Trade Memorandum on the Control of Certain Articles after the War.)

(A.)—Wool.

It is desirable that there should be immediate consultation among such of the Dominion Governments as are concerned with wool production for the purpose of framing a scheme for the control, so far as possible, of wool produced in the British Empire during the period immediately following the war, with a view to safeguarding Imperial resources and meeting the industrial needs of the Empire and the Allies.

(B.)—Metals.

1. That it is desirable that the exports to foreign countries of important ores and metals (the produce of the British Empire) should be controlled for a period after the war.

2. That the Conference welcomes the proposed establishment of a powerful organisation among the Allies for dealing with non-ferrous metals and ores, so as to free the Empire and the Allied countries from their previous dependence on German-controlled organisations for this purpose. That the proposed inter-Ally organisation should preferably be based on national organisations, with machinery for joint action, and that the Non-Ferrous Metals Committee set up by the Board of Trade, and now enlarged by the addition of Dominion representatives, be charged with working out a detailed scheme for discussion with the French and other Allies.

3. That the Governments of the Empire should consider the desirability of imposing restrictions on the acquisition of mineral rights, or of certain classes of mineral rights, within the Empire by or on behalf of aliens, and particularly of subjects of present enemy States.
Meat.

In view of the extent to which the United Kingdom and certain other parts of the Empire are dependent on oversea supplies for meat and of the desirability of freeing British markets from excessive dependence on foreign organisations which control important sources of supply, this Conference is of opinion that there should be co-operation between the Imperial Government and the Governments of the Overseas Dominions to ensure—

1. That the Empire should become as far as possible self-sufficient in the matter of meat supplies.

2. That the co-operation of Imperial credit should be secured to the Overseas Dominions in developing their meat resources by means of railways, irrigation works, &c.

3. That the United Kingdom and other portions of the Empire which do not produce enough meat for their own needs should have a first call at reasonable prices on meat produced in other parts of the Empire in excess of local requirements.

4. That in so far as there is a surplus of meat supplies the Imperial Government should assist the Governments of the Overseas Dominions in securing a share of continental and American trade.

5. That the Imperial Government should influence British insulated tonnage so that it may be directed towards the aforesaid purposes.

In order that the aims set forth herein may be attained, the Governments of the Overseas Dominions should take steps to ensure that they should have full control over their meat resources, and should prepare detailed plans for discussion with the Imperial Government for the development and distribution of their meat supply.