WAR CABINET, 117.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.,
at 11.30 A.M. on Wednesday, April 11, 1917.

Present:
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P. (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 following were also present:—
The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 10).
The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 13).
Lieutenant-General Sir H. E. Belfield, K.C.B., D.S.O., Director of Prisoners of War (for Minute 13).
The Right Hon. the Lord Newton (for Minute 13).
Mr. J. F. Hope, M.P. (for Minute 13).

Major-General C. E. Callwell, C.B. (for Minute 14).
The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.D., M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minutes 15 to 21).
The Right Hon. Sir J. P. Maclay, Bt., M.P., Shipping Controller (for Minutes 15 to 21).

Fleet Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

The Western Front.

1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff explained, on a large-scale map, the tactical situation in the Arras region, and stated that we continued to make satisfactory progress and had captured Monchy and La Bergère. He handed in a tabular statement of prisoners taken on various occasions since the Battle of the Somme, showing that our recent haul of 11,000 prisoners in two days was a record for the operations of the Allies on the Western Front.
2. With regard to his statement on the previous day relative to the German strength on the Western Front (War Cabinet 116, Minute 4), the Chief of the Imperial General Staff desired to amend the portion that related to the number of German rifles now opposing us, and stated that he estimated they had about 100,000 more than at the commencement of the Somme offensive.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that intelligence had been received to the effect that Jerusalem was being fortified, and heavy guns brought up for its defence.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that reports regarding the condition of the Army in the Caucasus were unfavourable. A mutiny had taken place at Kars, and desertions were numerous. He did not anticipate, however, that our Army in Mesopotamia was in a position of serious danger unless Russia abandoned all operations in the Caucasus.

5. The War Cabinet had a short discussion as to the Proclamation made yesterday by the Russian Government and the interpretation to be drawn therefrom with regard to Constantinople.

6. The First Sea Lord reported the loss of “P. 26,” due to striking a mine, with a loss of life of about twenty of the crew. Two officers and thirty-four men were saved.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 113, Minute 13, the First Emissary to the United States of America stated that he had received a communication to the effect that M. Viviani had been selected to head the French Mission to the United States of America, and the French Government desired to know when Mr. Balfour was leaving. The War Cabinet decided that—

   The Admiralty should inform the French Naval Authorities of the date of Mr. Balfour’s departure.

8. The First Sea Lord reported that he had received a communication from the Russian Naval Staff at Petrograd through the Russian Naval Attache in London to the effect that discipline was being restored in the Baltic Fleet, and efficiency would be attained. The Russians pointed out that they considered a German attack on the Island of Osel by German Naval and Military Forces highly probable as soon as practicable after the ice broke up, and asked for British Naval assistance.

   The War Cabinet, after discussing the question with the First Sea Lord, decided that—

   The Admiralty should render such assistance as they deemed practicable, the nature of which was indicated by Admiral Jellicoe.

9. The First Sea Lord reported a conversation with Admiral Sims, the United States Naval Representative, who had stated that the impression in his country, as well as his own impression, when he left, was that we had the submarine menace in hand. So long as this view prevailed, Admiral Sims considered that the United
States of America would not do much to help us in anti-submarine warfare. Admiral Sims had been convinced, in the course of the conversation, that the position was very serious, and proposed, after further consultation with Sir John Jellicoe, to send a telegram to that effect to his Government, which he thought would result in every effort being made by the Americans to assist us in every possible way to combat the submarine menace, more especially as the Government of the United States of America held very strong views relative to the "Freedom of the Seas."

The War Cabinet authorised—

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe to communicate freely and frankly with Admiral Sims in regard to the submarine menace.

10. The First-Sea Lord reported that he had made enquiries as to whether, in the event of the War Cabinet desiring it, the French would be willing to continue to carry out the bombing of open towns as an act of reprisal for attack on hospital ships, provided that the Royal Naval Air Service Unit now in the South of France left all its matériel there. He stated that the Royal Naval Air Service personnel were required for seaplane duties.

Lord Milner reported that the question had arisen during Easter, and, as the result of a consultation between the Prime Minister and himself, it had been decided to commence at once the bombing of an open town in Germany, and that the French had agreed to co-operate in this case and had approved the objective.

The First Sea Lord stated that leaflets would be dropped when the bombing took place, to indicate that this raid was carried out as a reprisal for the sinking of the hospital ship "Asturias."

The War Cabinet endorsed this decision, and requested the First Sea Lord to inform them as to the result of the enquiries referred to above.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

The Prime Minister should be asked to inform the Dominion Ministers to-morrow as to the action that had generally been taken in this matter.

11. The Secretary of State for War reported serious delay in the evacuation of wounded from France owing to the restrictions imposed by enemy action on the sailing of hospital ships. He stated that he had given orders that further hospitals were to be sent from England to France at the earliest possible moment, and that some had already been diverted to France from other theatres of war.

12. With reference to Imperial War Cabinet 3, Minute 5, the War Cabinet approved a proposal by the First Sea Lord to the effect that the opportunity of empty transports going to Canada should be utilised for sending women and children who desire to go there and will not return to this country during the war. This rule, however, only to take effect in the case of transports which the Admiralty can escort through the submarine danger zone.

13. The War Cabinet had under consideration an extract from a report by the Prisoners of War Sub-Committee, dated 16th March, 1917, on the subject of a proposal for the transport from Denmark and the employment in the United Kingdom of deserters of Danish race from the German armies. After discussion it was decided that—

By introducing these men we should be incurring risks and an amount of trouble out of all proportion to the results to be
anticipated, which are very problematical. Moreover, shipping, food, and possibly labour difficulties alone made such a course very undesirable. In these circumstances no action should be taken in the matter.

14. The War Cabinet decided that—

Lord Milner's Committee, the duties of which were laid down on the 4th April, 1917 (War Cabinet 113, Minute 16), should decide on Brigadier-General Poole's proposal for the establishment of a joint British and Russian Committee in Petrograd to deal, on behalf of Russia, with orders for materials from the British Isles (G.T.-380 A).

15. The War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum by the Admiralty (G.T.-381) urging that bulkheads should be provided in the standard ships to be built by the Shipping Controller.

The Shipping Controller stated that the Shipping Control Committee and the Shipbuilders' Committee were unanimously opposed to the introduction of any additional bulkheads in this class of ships. They did not believe that they would save the ship; on the other hand, they interfered seriously with the working of the cargo.

The First Sea Lord held a contrary opinion as regards the saving of the ship, and stated that, in any case, she would take longer to sink, which would afford more opportunity for the beaching of the vessel or the saving of life.

The War Cabinet decided that—

In the first instance, representatives of the Constructive Department of the Admiralty and the Shipbuilders' Committee should confer, and the matter should only be again brought forward for the consideration of the War Cabinet if they failed to agree.

16. The First Sea Lord reported that he was putting forward a proposal for the construction of an unsinkable 50,000-ton ship for the conveyance of wheat, &c.

The Shipping Controller expressed an opinion, not shared by the First Sea Lord, that under present conditions such a vessel would take two years to build, or possibly eighteen months.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Constructive Department of the Admiralty and the Shipbuilders' Committee should also confer on this subject, and, if necessary, report to the War Cabinet in due course.

17. The War Cabinet had under consideration a letter (Appendix) from the Shipping Controller to the Secretary, giving the particulars in regard to the mercantile losses for the first nine days of April and March respectively, but the First Sea Lord pointed out that, though the losses were extremely serious, the comparison had been made between periods of relatively heavy and light losses.
18. The Minister of Munitions reported that he was investigating the possibility of releasing more steel for shipbuilding.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Minister of Munitions should confer with the Shipping Controller and War Office with a view to concerting measures for a more rapid output of shipping, and that a combined report should be submitted as soon as possible to the War Cabinet.

19. The War Cabinet discussed the situation as regards the wheat supply in the United Kingdom, and decided that—

The Food Controller should in future render weekly to the Secretary, for their information, a return as regards wheat, barley, oats, maize, rice, and sugar, giving—

(a.) Stocks in (i) Great Britain, and (ii) Ireland.
(b.) Quantities en route.
(c.) Stocks purchased abroad but awaiting shipment, specifying where located.
(d.) A forecast of anticipated future stocks.

20. The Shipping Controller informed the War Cabinet that he had withdrawn six ships from the timber trade and diverted them for the importation of wheat.

21. The First Sea Lord pointed out that there were 69,000 tons of stores in ships at Romanoff awaiting discharge, and advocated that no further supplies should be sent to Russia until the situation there had cleared.

It was pointed out, however, that Archangel, when freed from ice, would be able to deal with supplies at a far more rapid rate.

The Shipping Controller stated that nineteen ships were en route from England to America to load munitions for Russia, and that he had issued directions that eleven of these were to be utilised to bring wheat in lieu to the United Kingdom.

The War Cabinet generally approved the action of the Shipping Controller in this matter, but decided that—

Lord Milner's Committee should carefully enquire into the question of what freight for Russia was awaiting shipment in America, and decide what portion it was imperative should be shipped, and inform the Shipping Controller as requisite.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

If any complaints were made by the Russian Government they should be informed that grave shortage of shipping was the cause of delay, but that every possible effort was being, and would be, made to meet their demands.

(Initialled) A. B. L.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 11, 1917.
Dear Colonel Hankey,

I THINK it is well that you should draw the Prime Minister's attention to the losses this month, as compared with March.

During the first nine days of April the losses of British tonnage reported is 39, gross tonnage of 102,262 tons, against 29 vessels in March, gross tonnage of 77,000 tons.

Further, Allied tonnage has been lost to the extent of 59,000 tons, as compared with 23,000 tons in March.

22 neutral vessels have been lost with a tonnage of 31,000 tons, as compared with 10 vessels with a tonnage of 15,000 tons.

This gives a total loss of 192,000 tons in nine days, as compared with 115,000 tons in March.

Further, the amount of tonnage damaged during the same period is 47,000 tons, as compared with 21,000 tons.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) J. P. MACLAY.