Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, April 23, 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.

The Right Hon. A. Henderson, M.P.

The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.

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

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. the Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P. (representing the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs).


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


The Right Hon. Sir J. Maclay, Bt., M.P., Controller of Shipping (for Minutes 8 to 19).


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

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

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Captain L. S. Amery, Assistant Secretary.
1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that in the recent offensive on the Western Front the Tanks had done very well, and that none of them had been lost. The French, on the other hand, had, unfortunately, lost half the machines which took part in their offensive.

2. The favourable reports that had recently been made about the British heavy artillery had been fully confirmed.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that further attacks were in progress against the Turks on the right bank of the Tigris.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that for some time he had not felt that the British operations in East Africa were being carried out as satisfactorily as could be desired. He had discussed the matter on more than one occasion with General Smuts, who, while holding a high opinion of the Officer in Command, Major-General A. R. Hoskins, had agreed that apparently he had lost grip of the operations and perhaps had become tired.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read telegrams from the Commander-in-Chief, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, indicating that the attack on the Gaza position had not achieved success, and that about a week must elapse before preparations would be completed for a renewal of the offensive on a large scale.

6. It was pointed out that General Smuts had expressed very decided views as to the strategical importance of Palestine to the future of the British Empire, and would therefore be likely to prosecute a campaign in that quarter with great determination, and there was a strong feeling that he would be one of the most suitable selections for the Chief Command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

On the other hand, the War Cabinet were aware that there was a growing opinion in favour of the retention of General Smuts in a central position in this country, with a view to the utilisation of his great qualities in the higher conduct of the War.

* Not printed or circulated.
Imperial Representation on the War Cabinet.

7. This led to a short discussion on the general question of Imperial representation on the War Cabinet. The difficulties of providing permanent representation of the Dominions were pointed out to be, firstly, that if all the Dominions were permanently represented in the Cabinet its numbers would become unwieldy; and, secondly, that, if all the Dominions were not permanently represented, none of them would regard as satisfactory their representation by a Minister of another Dominion. An alternative solution suggested was that each Dominion should be represented in turn for a certain fixed period only.

8. In alluding to the recent very serious shipping losses, the Prime Minister referred to the possibility of adopting the convoy system, which, he said, was favoured by Admiral Beatty and by Admiral Sims.

The First Sea Lord reported that the matter was under consideration, one of the chief obstacles to adopting such a scheme being the shortage of torpedo-boat-destroyers. He stated that there was some prospect of American destroyers being sent to assist us, and that six had already been ordered to leave for this country. A much larger number would, however, be necessary before any scheme of convoy could be introduced.

The First Sea Lord mentioned that the trial of the convoy system by the Commander-in-Chief Grand Fleet had not been altogether successful; two vessels in separate convoys having already been torpedoed and sunk.

The First Sea Lord undertook to make a further report on the matter to the War Cabinet.

In regard to the above question, Lord Curzon pointed out that, though the matter came before the War Cabinet very frequently, they were never in a position to grasp the whole situation and place it under review. He suggested that a small but strong Committee, composed of a representative from the Admiralty, War Office, the Shipping Controller, and the Minister of Munitions, with a member of the War Cabinet in the Chair, should meet once a week to review the situation as regards food, shipping, and losses. He suggested that it would be convenient if this small Committee should sit every Saturday, so that it might present its report every week to the War Cabinet on the following Monday.

9. The War Cabinet had a preliminary discussion on the very serious situation disclosed by the memorandum which had been submitted by the First Sea Lord, "The Submarine Menace and Food Supply" (Paper G.T.-519).

It was decided that—

Further information as to the Admiralty's estimate of future losses, the present and prospective situation in regard to food, and the absolute minimum of imports essential to the Allied armies and the existence of the Allies, was necessary for a full investigation of the subject to be made.

In order to enable the above information to be collected, further consideration of the subject was deferred for a Special Meeting of the War Cabinet at 5 p.m. on the same day.

10. The First Sea Lord gave his usual report of shipping casualties due to enemy submarines, and stated that the British submarine "E 50" had rammed and sunk an enemy submarine, and that it seemed probable that another enemy submarine had been sunk.
Loss of an Airship.
11. The First Sea Lord also reported that a British coastal airship had been brought down and destroyed by the enemy.

Prisoners of War:
Stoppage of Parcels.
12. In reference to the reported stoppage by the Germans of the food sent to British prisoners in Germany (War Cabinet 122, Minute 14), the First Sea Lord reported that he had ascertained from an escaped British officer prisoner of war that the delivery of food packets sent out from England had been stopped in the case of one camp for the week preceding the escape of the officer in question.

The Secretary of State for War informed the Cabinet that he had received similar information in regard to another camp, but that he had discussed the matter with General Belfield and Sir Starr Jameson, and had come to the conclusion that there was no evidence that general instructions had been issued by the German Government to stop the food parcels to British prisoners of war.

Destroyer Action.
13. The First Sea Lord added a few details to the published communiqué on the subject of the recent destroyer action in the Channel, and mentioned several remarkable acts of individual gallantry.

The War Cabinet instructed him—
To arrange for the earliest possible publication of a detailed account of the action before interest in the matter should die down.

Poland.
14. Lord Robert Cecil read a draft of a statement which it was proposed to make in the House of Commons in regard to Poland. He explained that Mr. Balfour had promised that a statement should be made in which there would be a reference to the Russian Proclamation. The draft had been sent to the British Ambassador in Petrograd, who had approved it, and explained that the Minister for Foreign Affairs had also approved it, especially if some reference were made to unity in the sense in which this had been done in the Proclamation of the Russian Provisional Government. He suggested that the statement in the House of Commons should be made either by the Prime Minister or the Leader of the House.

The War Cabinet approved of the proposed statement being made.

Secession of Bulgaria from the Central Powers.
15. The Prime Minister, in reference to the report on the recent Anglo-French-Italian Conference (Paper I.C.-20), stated that the Italians entertained considerable hopes of Bulgaria seceding from the Central Powers, and possibly even coming in on the side of the Allies. Baron Sonnino had informed him that he had so far taken no steps to forward this matter for fear of arousing the jealousy of the French, though he was extremely anxious that every encouragement should be given to Bulgaria. The Prime Minister was of opinion that if the Allies were to succeed in inflicting a defeat of any magnitude on the Bulgarians at Salonica, the latter might not only break away from the Central Powers, but might turn on the Turks.

Lord Robert Cecil read a report to the effect that the Bulgarians might very possibly be induced to turn against the Turks, that they wanted to retain Grecian Thrace, would not give up any territory south of the Danube, but would be willing to cede Monastir and part of Macedonia. Lord Robert Cecil suggested that a reply should be sent to the effect that the British Government would be very glad to receive and consider any definite proposals put forward by the Bulgarian Government.

The War Cabinet approved this action.
16. In continuation of the report on the recent Conference (Paper I.C.-20), the Prime Minister stated that, at his interview in Paris with M. Ribot, M. Painlevé, and General Nivelle, he had handed in the memorandum on the Protection of Shipping in the Mediterranean (Paper G.T.-481, dated 17th April, 1917) prepared by the First Sea Lord, and also the comments of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff thereon (Paper G.T.-481 A, dated 17th April, 1917). He had informed the French representatives at the Conference that the shipping situation might compel us to insist on a withdrawal to a shorter front at Salonica. In the conversation which followed M. Ribot and M. Painlevé had shown less opposition to this proposal than he had anticipated, provided that we would assist them to clear up the situation in Greece itself, including, if necessary, the removal of King Constantine from the throne. The Prime Minister was inclined to the view that a bargain might be made on these lines for the reduction of the British forces in the Balkans.

It had eventually been agreed that the whole question should be considered at a further Conference to be held in two weeks' time, when the situation on the Western front would be more clear and the time more suitable for a comprehensive review of the whole military and political situation.

17. In reference to the passage in the report of the Anglo-French-Italian Conference dealing with the Italian claims, the Prime Minister said that he himself was inclined to accede to the Italian claims for Smyrna, but that if the War Cabinet shared this view he thought it would be necessary to insist very strongly that Italy could not hope to obtain such a great territorial acquisition unless she was prepared to increase the effort she was making in the war. He suggested, as an example of the way in which Italy might do this, that she might supply, either directly or by substituting Italian troops for British forces withdrawn from elsewhere, the reinforcements for Egypt recently asked for by General Sir A. Murray.

Lord Hardinge pointed out that there were important British interests in Smyrna, and that it was highly desirable that these should not be injured by any transfer of territory to Italy. He urged that the condition should be made that Smyrna should be a free port.

In this connection Lord Robert Cecil reminded the War Cabinet that Lord Grey had undertaken that British interests in Smyrna should not be an obstacle to Italian aspirations in that quarter.

The War Cabinet agreed that if the Smyrna district were allocated to Italy after the war it would be necessary to stipulate that Smyrna should remain a free port. It was decided that—

The Foreign Office should draft, for the consideration of the War Cabinet, a telegram to the British Ambassador in Rome, based on the following considerations:—

(a.) That the British Government would be prepared to include Konia within the prospective Italian sphere of influence.
(b.) That they would, however, undertake that the question of what each nation was to receive after the war could be entirely dissociated from the efforts they had made in the common cause of the Allies, and that they were not altogether satisfied that Italy's exertions had been in proportion to her powers.
18. The War Cabinet decided that—
To requests made in the House of Commons for information about man-power, a reply should be given in the sense that the matter was to be dealt with in Secret Session, and that a postponement should be asked for in regard to a corresponding question in the House of Lords.

19. In reference to a further communication from the Portuguese Government urging an amendment of the decision of the British Government against any increase of the Portuguese contingent already in France (War Cabinet 104, Minute 13), the War Cabinet authorised—

The Secretary of State for War to reply that shipping considerations compelled the British Government to adhere to its previous decision.

(Initialled) D. Ll. G.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 23, 1917.