WAR CABINET, 126.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, April 25, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The Prime Minister (in the Chair).


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

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

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

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. Lord R. Cecil, K.C., M.P., Minister of Blockade.


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

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

1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the casualties since the 22nd April in the Arras battle were 19,000, and that the whole of the objectives of the British attack had been achieved. We had also captured 3,029 prisoners, including fifty-six officers.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 122, Minute 8, the War Cabinet discussed telegram No. 386, dated the 24th April, 1917, from the British Ambassador at Paris, stating that there were rumours that the Senate Army Commission had asked for full information from the Minister of War regarding the non-success of the French offensive, and that General Nivelle might be superseded and replaced by General Petain.

The Prime Minister said that this confirmed reports that he had received from an independent source in Paris, which had added the
information that the substitution of General Pétain for General Nivelle would, it was believed, lead to the adoption of a defensive policy by the French Army pending the development of assistance from the United States of America.

The War Cabinet felt that any interruption of the French offensive might, by releasing the enemy's reserves, produce most serious effects on the Arras operations, where the British Army is engaged in complete execution of the plans agreed to by the two Governments. In view of the undertaking given personally by M. Ribot and M. Painlevé to the Prime Minister in Paris, that pending the next Conference the French Army would continue the offensive with a view to the retention of a number of the German reserves on the French Front, the War Cabinet do not believe that the action of the Senate Army Commission can affect the operations now in progress, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that, apart from the telegram in question, he had no evidence that the French did not intend to press their offensive.

The War Cabinet felt, however, that the matter was too serious to be left in doubt, and therefore requested—

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff to bring the telegram to the notice of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Wilson, and invite him to give his personal impressions in regard to General Nivelle's intentions.

3. The War Cabinet instructed the Secretary to invite General Smuts to give them his opinion in regard to the strategy of the war, including the situation on the Western Front.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that the Russians and Americans were apparently coming to terms as regards the assistance of the latter in reorganising the Siberian railways.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that he had received a telegram from General Milne to the effect that the preparatory artillery action was proceeding according to plan.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 125, Minute 1, the War Cabinet had a further discussion on the question of the submarine menace. There was a general feeling that the Cabinet were not sufficiently informed on all the varying aspects of the question, e.g., anti-submarine warfare, protection and control of shipping, priority of the various claims on shipping, our own requirements of food and munitions and those of our Allies, shipbuilding, steel, &c. Recent enquiries by the War Cabinet have made it clear that there is not at present sufficient co-ordination in these matters. It was decided that—

(a.) The Prime Minister should visit the Admiralty with a view to investigating all the means at present in use in regard to anti-submarine warfare.

(b.) Lord Milner, on behalf of the Cabinet, should, in conjunction with the Departments concerned, investigate the question of the priority of the claims on shipping, with special reference to the accumulation of the largest possible stocks of food-supplies, and to the arrangements for shipping such supplies at ports abroad and disembarking them in the United Kingdom.
(c.) Lord Curzon should decide, after enquiry from the Heads of Departments and other persons whose views might be obtained with advantage, the general question of the output of shipping, including more particularly the following matters which were before the War Cabinet—

(i.) The priority of steel between shipbuilding and other claims;
(ii.) The question of completing merchant ships in course of construction, but whose further progress has been deferred owing to the absence of certificates from the Board of Trade;
(iii.) The War Office shipbuilding demands (G.T.-498);
(iv.) The question of building "unsinkable" mammoth ships.

7. The Prime Minister informed the War Cabinet that he had received information that six of the vessels referred to in Minute 6(ii) were being delayed at the works of Messrs. Harland and Wolff, Belfast, owing to the absence of the certificates referred to, and that a further small extension of works was desired by that firm to enable them to expedite the building of standard and other ships.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Board of Trade should issue forthwith the certificates required, and the Ministry of Munitions should grant facilities for the extension of the works desired by Messrs. Harland and Wolff.

8. The War Cabinet decided that, with reference to the question of the removal of the base supply by the military from Avonmouth and Liverpool—

The Secretary of State for War and the Shipping Controller should confer together with a view to settling this matter, the question being only brought up for the decision of the War Cabinet in the event of their failure to agree. In any case, a report of their action should be furnished for the information of the War Cabinet.

9. Lord Robert Cecil stated that the Norwegian Minister had expressed the view that relations between Norway and Germany were likely, sooner or later, to result in a state of war between those countries, and that he had asked for information as to what action the British could take to protect the Norwegian coast.

Lord Robert Cecil added that a telegram had been received from Sweden which indicated that the Swedes also realised the possibility of war between Norway and Germany, and were anxious as to their own action in the matter; indications pointed to the fact that they would have to ally themselves with Norway.

On the suggestion of the First Sea Lord, the War Cabinet desired—

Lord Robert Cecil to recommend to the Norwegian Government that Norway should send naval representatives to London to concert measures with the Admiralty, and that he should further inform the Norwegian Government that it would be probable that assistance should also be asked for from the United States of America.

The First Sea Lord undertook to discuss the question with Admiral Sims, the representative of the United States Navy Board in this country.

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10. In continuation of the discussion recorded in War Cabinet 124, Minute 17, the War Cabinet had under consideration a draft telegram to the British Ambassador in Rome, prepared by Lord Robert Cecil, in regard to the Italian aspirations in Asia Minor.

After some discussion the statement in the Appendix was approved for communication to the Italian Government.

11. Out of the question of Italian aspirations in Asia Minor arose a general discussion on the subject of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was subjected to considerable criticism, more particularly from the point of view of the proposed internationalisation of Palestine, which was felt to be impossible.

The Prime Minister said that at the recent Conference he had hinted that the British Government considered that Palestine should come under British control, but that the proposal had been very coldly received.

It was stated that information had been obtained that there was a strong feeling in France that Palestine should be included in the French sphere.

Although the War Cabinet inclined to the view that sooner or later the Sykes-Picot Agreement might have to be reconsidered in concert with our Allies, it was decided that—

No action should at present be taken in this matter.

12. In connection with the statement in the report circulated by the Prime Minister (Paper I.C.-20) regarding his recent Conference with the French and Italian Representatives, to the effect that Baron Sonnino had shown himself far less hostile than formerly to the French policy in Greece, Lord Robert Cecil suggested the possibility that some understanding had been reached between the French and Italian Governments on the basis that France should have a free hand in Greece in return for French support to Italian aspirations in Asia Minor.

13. Lord Robert Cecil drew the attention of the War Cabinet to a misunderstanding on the part of the French Government with regard to his answer to a question by Mr. R. McNeill in the House of Commons, and stated that he had been informed that, in consequence of the erroneous reporting of the answer referred to, the French Government had stated that they considered themselves relieved of all their undertakings as to not advancing in Thessaly. The War Cabinet decided that—

The French must be informed that they must stand by their agreement and await the decisions that may be arrived at at the forthcoming Conference, and requested Lord Robert Cecil to explain to the French Ambassador the situation and the erroneous interpretation made by the French.

14. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (G.T.-533), in which he suggested a modification in the instructions issued last March to General Sir A. Murray to advance at once on Jerusalem. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff explained that General Murray, having failed up to the present to capture the Turkish position covering Gaza, was not unlikely, in his desire to carry out his instructions, to
undertake a further attack, in which he might lose a very large number of men with doubtful prospects of success.

The War Cabinet approved the modification of the instructions, and requested the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to inform General Sir A. Murray that he was to take every favourable opportunity of defeating the Turkish forces opposed to him, and to follow up with all the means at his disposal any success gained, with the object of driving the Turks from Palestine as and when this becomes practicable.

15. The War Cabinet continued their discussion (War Cabinet 124, Minute 5) on the question of the Chief Command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. General Smuts' name was again brought up in this connection, but doubt was expressed as to whether such an appointment would be favourably received by the Australians, who have 20,000 men engaged in Egypt. It was, moreover, pointed out that General Smuts has had no experience in the modern conditions of European warfare, which also prevailed to some extent in the Palestine campaign.

No decision was taken.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 25, 1917.
APPENDIX I.

Copy of Telegram approved by the War Cabinet to be sent to Sir R. Rodd, Rome.

YOUR telegram.

You should make the following communication to the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs:

The War Cabinet have had under consideration the claims put forward by the Italian Government, under article 9 of the Treaty of the 26th April, 1915, to an equitable share of territory in the region of the Mediterranean adjoining the Province of Adalia, in the event of the complete or partial partition of the territories of Turkey in Asia.

Although the partition of these regions is one of the aims of the Allies in this war, it is still far from realisation. Nevertheless, subject to the consent of the Russian Government, the War Cabinet agree conditionally to the zones of occupation and of interest respectively to be attributed to Italy, as defined in the Conference held at St. Jean-de-Maurienne on the 19th April, and as shown on the map. It is understood by the War Cabinet that, if at the time when peace is declared, the total or partial possession of the territories contemplated in the agreements come to between Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia as to the disposal of part of the Ottoman Empire cannot be fully accorded to one or more of those Powers, then the interests of the Powers concerned will be again taken into equitable consideration having regard to the efforts made by each of the Powers.

The War Cabinet desire, however, to point out to the Italian Government that the allocation to Italy of such large territories of the Ottoman Empire can hardly be regarded as justified by the effort hitherto made by Italy in the war as compared with the sacrifices already made by Great Britain, France, and Russia, more particularly in their conflict with Turkey, in which no Italian forces have so far taken part.

While a considerable French Naval and Military force co-operated with British ships and troops in the attacks on the Dardanelles, Great Britain has during the past 2½ years maintained a force of more than 300,000 men in operations undertaken against the Turks on the confines of Egypt and in Mesopotamia, while Russia, during the same period, has carried on a successful campaign in Eastern Asia Minor, and inflicted serious losses upon Turkey of territory, men, and material. The exhaustion of Turkey, which alone could render such a partition as now contemplated possible, will, if realised, be chiefly due to efforts of the Allies not shared by Italy. Under these circumstances, the War Cabinet strongly urge the Italian Government to make an increased effort to co-operate with the Allies against the common enemy, and they trust that they will understand that the achievement of Italian aspirations in Asia Minor must be conditional on such an effort being made.

The War Cabinet also make a reservation to their assent to the eventual cession of Smyrna that the port shall be free.