WAR CABINET, 136.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, May 11, 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. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.

The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P. (for Minutes 1 to 5).

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

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P., Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 17).

The Right Hon. the Earl of Derry, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 14).

Major-General F. B. Maurice, C.B., Director of Military Operations (for Minutes 1 to 10).


The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.D., M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minute 18).

Sir Charles Ellis, K.C.B., Director-General of Ordnance Supply (for Minute 18).


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

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Mr. G. M. Young, Assistant Secretary.
The Western Front.

1. THE Director of Military Operations reported that there was no change on the Western Front, and that stiff fighting was taking place at Bullecourt.

Transfer of German Divisions from Eastern to Western Front.

2. The Director of Military Operations reported that a German Division from the Eastern Front had been identified at Verdun, making a total of two that had recently arrived out of the thirteen which it was anticipated would be brought from the East to the West. In this connection he drew attention to Foreign Office telegram No. 2826, dated the 10th May, 1917, from Copenhagen, stating, on the authority of the German Minister who had just returned there from Berlin, that Division upon Division had been taken away from the Russian Front, and that the enemy hoped not only to hold us in check but to defeat us.

Salonica.

3. The Director of Military Operations reported that our minor operation on the Salonica Front had not resulted in much progress, neither had that of the French and the Italians; in fact, the latter lost very heavily. He had no information to give the War Cabinet regarding the main attack, which was to have commenced yesterday.

Mesopotamia.

4. The Director of Military Operations informed the War Cabinet that the Russians were trying to render some assistance in Mesopotamia. The 14th Turkish Division, which was on its way to join the Corps on the Tigris, had been ordered back to check the Russian progress. General Maude had sent two columns to assist the Russians.

Russia.

5. Lord Robert Cecil read telegram No. 658, dated the 10th May, 1917, from Petrograd, from the British consul at Odessa, indicating the deplorable lack of discipline in the Russian army stationed in the vicinity, and the very poor prospects of any offensive on the part of the Russian forces.

Naval Losses.

6. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that a minesweeping trawler had been sunk by a mine.

Air Raids.

7. The First Sea Lord reported that two air raids had taken place against Zeebrugge and Ostend, the second being delivered after the return of the German destroyers on their escape from Commodore Tyrwhitt's patrol. He had no information with regard to the damage caused.

German Submarine Losses.

8. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet of the particulars of an engagement between the sloop “Zinnia” and a German submarine, and indicated that it was highly probable that the submarine had been destroyed. He stated that our submarine successes lately had possibly been more than he had previously given credit for.

Native Labour: Recruiting.

9. In connection with the shortage of shipping, the War Cabinet considered the question of further recruiting of coolies in China, and also the question of transferring coolies recruited in West Africa to East Africa.

The Secretary of State for War stated that he would issue the necessary instructions to hold up further enlistment of coolies in China, and would consider the whole question of imported labour in
its various bearings, with special regard to the saving of shipping tonnage, and report as soon as possible to the War Cabinet for their decision.

Hospital Ships:
Reprisals.

10. The First Sea Lord raised the question as to neutral representatives being placed on board hospital ships in the Mediterranean with a view to their being able to assure the German Government, if called upon, that we were strictly complying with the terms of the Geneva Convention.

The Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs undertook to take the necessary action as to requesting the King of Spain or the Pope to detail their representatives in this connection.

11. With reference to War Cabinet 180, Minute 14, the War Cabinet decided that, in order to develop and utilise the shipbuilding resources of this country to the best advantage, it is necessary to concentrate the organisation in one person.

The War Cabinet therefore decided that—

Major-General Sir Eric Geddes should be appointed to the post created for the purpose, and that he should be responsible for fulfilling the requirements of the Admiralty, War Office, and Ministry of Shipping, so far as is possible, by manufacture or purchase, whether at home or abroad.

For this purpose the staffs of the three Departments will be placed under his control.

Where questions of priority in allotment of resources arise, and in larger questions of policy, he will take his instructions from the War Cabinet.

On account of his proposed other duties at the Admiralty in connection with supplies of armament, &c., and on account of the complexity of naval design, it is necessary that his touch with the Admiralty should be very close, and it has therefore been decided that he shall be appointed one of the Lords of the Admiralty.

Sir Eric Geddes will also be a member of the Shipping Control Committee.

12. The First Lord of the Admiralty informed the War Cabinet that he had received a report that a meeting had been held of the Firemen and Seamen's Union with a view to starting an agitation to prevent merchant seamen going to sea on account of the submarine menace. He stated that he had given orders that full enquiries should be made as to the truth of this report, which he was not inclined to believe, and would inform the War Cabinet of the result.

13. The War Cabinet had a short discussion on the bad effects on the moral of the people of this country, and on Allied interests abroad, of recent articles in the newspapers dealing with the effect of the submarine menace on our food supply.

14. The War Cabinet decided that—

Notwithstanding the strikes now in progress, His Majesty the King should be advised to carry out his intended visit to the industrial areas in the north, and that arrangements should be made for His Majesty to see the leading Trade Unionists in each district. Mr. Arthur Henderson undertook to give effect to this decision.
The War Cabinet further decided that—
The present restrictions on the publication of His Majesty's movements were unreasonable, and that much wider publicity should be given.

Stockholm Socialist Conference:

15. Mr. Henderson reported that, at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, it had been decided, by a majority of 9 to 4, not to take part in the Socialist Conference at Stockholm, but to send a Mission to Petrograd to impress on the Russian Socialists the danger of a separate peace. Mr. Henderson, Mr. G. Roberts, M.P., and Mr. Purdy had been selected to form the Mission.

The War Cabinet decided that—

In view of the industrial situation at home, it was not desirable that Mr. Henderson should leave the country, and that if, notwithstanding, the Executive of the Labour Party proceeded with their proposal to send a Mission, Mr. G. Roberts should have facilities for joining it.

Labour Situation:

16. Mr. Henderson informed the War Cabinet that he had been enquiring into the organisation of the Ministry of Labour and had taken steps to expedite the machinery for settling disputes; and, further, that an Intelligence Department was being created under 

The War Cabinet decided that—

Mr. Henderson should make what arrangements he considered desirable for furnishing them regularly with reports on the labour situation.

British Representation in the United States of America.

17. With reference to Mr. Balfour's proposal in a Private and Personal telegram to the Prime Minister, that after his return some person of the highest prestige and political position should be selected as a special and permanent British Representative in the United States of America, and that Lord Grey should be urged to accept this position (War Cabinet 135A, Minute 4),* the War Cabinet authorised the Prime Minister to communicate with Lord Grey on the subject.

Guns for the Western Front.

18. Major-General Birch, Commanding the Artillery on the Western Front, informed the War Cabinet that they were deficient in long-range guns and heavy howitzers of modern long-ranging pattern, and that Sir Douglas Haig wished him to point out that if forecasts were not adhered to it is extremely difficult to make plans which it could reasonably be hoped would be successful.

The Minister of Munitions reported that the delay was due partly to the programme of 4-inch guns for merchant-ships approved by the War Cabinet, partly to the need of howitzers for the Navy, and partly to the failure of certain private firms to complete their contracts by the dates arranged, but some of the long-range howitzers for the Army would be ready at the end of May.

The Master-General of Ordnance pointed out that he understood there might be difficulty in realizing even the latest forecast unless the War Cabinet decided that the recent order given by the Admiralty for 7.5-inch and 11-inch howitzers was not to interfere with the gun programme for the Army.

* These Minutes, which dealt in the main with military operations and were of an exceptionally secret character, were not printed.
The War Cabinet decided that—

A Conference should be held this afternoon between the Ministry of Munitions and the War Office, assisted by Major-General Birch, at which the representatives of the firms should be asked to attend and the gun programme gone through, and the best possible arrangements made to expedite deliveries of the guns so urgently required.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
May 11, 1917.