WAR CABINET, 137.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, May 14, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The Prime Minister (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kedleston, K.G., G.O.S.I., G.C.I.E.

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

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

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

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. the Lord R. Cecil, K.C., M.P., Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.


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

Captain L. S. Amery, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that, according to information received by him, the situation in Russia was very serious, and that he had heard that German officer prisoners were walking about in freedom in Moscow. It was also reported that the Officer Commanding the Russian 9th Army in Roumania had been removed from his Command and that his Chief of Staff had been placed under arrest.

Other information with regard to the lack of discipline and the spread of the extremist movement to Moscow and Odessa was communicated by Lord Robert Cecil.
India.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that the Commander-in-Chief in India had telegraphed to say that, owing to the recent trouble on the North-West Frontier and the necessity for maintaining a force adequate to administer punishment to the tribesmen concerned, and to meet any eventualities at what appeared to be a somewhat precarious time, he considered it necessary to keep in India the seven battalions of Territorials which had been destined for Egypt, and the three battalions of Native troops which were to have been sent to East Africa, in exchange for three battalions there which needed to be relieved.

Salonica.

3. In reference to War Cabinet 128, Minute 5, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that General Milne had reported that when the two cavalry brigades and one division were withdrawn he would have withdrawn a portion of his line from the Struma River, and had requested that one regiment of the two Mounted Brigades which were to be withdrawn should be left behind. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff had agreed that one regiment should be the last unit to leave of those to be sent away.

Though the Serbians had effected something, the recent offensive of the Salonica Force had resulted in no material advance.

The Western Front.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that out of the original 49 reserve divisions which the Germans had had on the Western front, all except five had now been thrown into the fight, but that they still had a total of 63 divisions which had not yet been used in the fight, though several of these were of indifferent quality. German divisions were undoubtedly being transferred from the Eastern to the Western front, but the figure of 40 divisions given in a recent report was wholly exaggerated.

French Military Policy.

5. The subject of the military policy of the French came under discussion in connection with a letter written by General Sir H. Wilson to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, which showed that the question of the Chief Command of the French Armies had not been finally settled, and that consequently the nature of the co-operation between the French and British Armies was not as definite as it should be, notwithstanding the decision reached at the Conference in Paris on the 3rd-4th May, 1917. It was obvious that the uncertainty of the situation was due to political causes.

The Prime Minister undertook to allude to this matter in a letter which he was about to send by special messenger to M. Ribot.

Egypt.

6. In reference to telegram No. 1902, dated the 12th May, 1917, from the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Egypt, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that the only obstacle to sending out the 9,000 men asked for was the question of shipping. As a matter of fact, 7,500 of them were actually waiting at Marseilles.

Submarines.

7. The First Sea Lord detailed the losses from submarine attack during the previous three days.
8. The First Sea Lord reported that the Zeppelin “L 22” had been destroyed by British Naval Forces on the morning of the 14th May, near Terschelling.

9. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that Admiral Sims had received instructions from the United States of America to make enquiries into the coal supply of Italy, which, according to the information received in America, was very low. The First Sea Lord stated that a recent Foreign Office telegram had specified that it would be better if American ships were sent to England to load the coal lying there. He himself, however, was not sure if this was the right course to pursue. Though the distance from Cardiff to Gibraltar was only 1,850 miles as compared with 3,300 from Hampton Roads to Gibraltar, the latter was by far the safer route of the two. He thought, on the whole, that the best course would be to send the coal direct from the United States to Italy.

It was decided that—

This matter should be dealt with later, in conjunction with the Shipping Controller.

10. In reference to three Memoranda by Sir Leo Chiozza Money, M.P. (Papers G.T.-660, dated the 4th May, 1917; G.T.-698, dated the 7th May, 1917; G.T.-711, dated the 11th May, 1917) and a Memorandum (Paper G.T.-697, dated the 10th May, 1917) by the Shipping Controller, detailing a suggested system of restricting the British mercantile marine to the Atlantic routes and maintaining a reserve of ships, it appeared that the Admiralty and the Ministry of Shipping were in favour of the adoption of some such scheme.

The War Cabinet decided—

The matter should be investigated by a small Joint Committee, to be summoned by the First Sea Lord, composed of representatives of—

The Board of Admiralty,
The Board of Trade,
The Shipping Controller, and
The Ministry of Munitions,

which should report as early as possible to the War Cabinet.


Lord Robert Cecil was instructed to send a telegram to Sir E. Howard, at Stockholm, requesting him to clear up the position as regards the various proposed Socialist Conferences.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
May 14, 1917.