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Minutes of a Conference held at No 10 Downing
St on Wednesday November 10th 1920 at 12 Noon

Present

The Prime Minister (in the Chair)

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| Mr Bonar Law | Mr W. S. Churchill |
| Mr A. Chamberlain | Mr E. Shortt |
| Sir Hamar Greenwood | Mr H. A. L. Fisher |
| Mr Denis Henry | |

Sir M. P. A. Hankley G.C.B.
Captain L. F. Burgis

Secretary, Cabinet.
Asst. " Cabinet.

Situation in
Ireland.

The Conference met to ^{consider} a highly secret memorandum
(copy attached) by the Secretary of State for War in regard to
the situation in Ireland.

Sir Maurice Hankley reported that the Attorney General
(Sir Gordon Howard) had unfortunately not been able to attend the
meeting. He had been obliged to proceed to Paris for a
meeting to consider the question of war criminals, which had
already been postponed at his request and had been fixed on
this occasion expressly to meet his convenience. Sir Gordon
Howard had spoken to him (Sir M. Hankley) on the telephone and
had said he had not had time to make an exhaustive
inquiry into the questions raised, but his opinion in any opinion
was that anything in the nature of authorized reprisals could
not be carried out without legislation. The other two
suggestions, namely for a system of identification cards and
passports could be carried out under D.O.R.A.

After a very full discussion the Conference
agreed:

- (a) That the Chief Secretary should request General Tudor to prepare a considered scheme for putting into practice the proposal regarding identification cards; this scheme the Chief Secretary undertook to examine and to report as to its practicability.
- (b) That the Chief Secretary together with the Secretary of State for the Home Department should go into the question as to whether it was desirable to require all persons entering Ireland to possess a Passport.
- (c) That the Chief Secretary should do all in his power to prevent houses and creameries being burned by the R.I.C. and the Corps, as reprisals.
- (d) That the moment was not opportune to come to a decision with regard to the question of manured reprisals.

SECRET.

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THE CABINET.

THE IRISH SITUATION.

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR.

I would ask that a meeting of the Cabinet or a Conference of Ministers should take place next week on the situation in Ireland.

1. Very strong representations are being made to me by the military authorities that reprisals within certain strictly defined limits should be authorized by the Government and regulated by responsible officers of not less than Divisional rank. Complaint is made that the troops are getting out of control, taking the law into their own hands, and that besides clumsy and indiscriminate destruction, actual looting and thieving as well as drunkenness and gross disorder are occurring. In consequence of this, a number of courts-martial are being held upon soldiers, yet the position of the troops, always liable to be murdered by the Sinn Feiners, is such that it will not be possible to restrain their anger when outrages occur in their neighbourhood. I do not consider that the present Government attitude on reprisals can be maintained much longer. It is not fair on the troops, it is not fair on the officers who command them. Although the spirit of the Army is absolutely loyal and very hostile to the Irish rebels, there is no doubt that service in Ireland is intensely unpopular. I have repeated requests from officers of middle and senior rank to be allowed to retire or to be transferred. When a post is vacant in Ireland, sometimes six or seven officers refuse it in turn. This is not because these men are not resolute and loyal, but because they feel themselves to be in a false position.

It is for consideration whether a policy of reprisals within strict limits and under strict control in certain districts, in which it should be declared that conditions approximating to a state of war exist, would not be right at the present time. It is thought by many that such a policy would be less discreditable and more effective than what is now going on. The recent formidable increase in outrages in particular districts affords an opportunity for a review of the position. I cannot feel it right to punish the troops when, goaded in the most brutal manner and finding no redress, they take action on their own account. If they were to remain absolutely passive, they would become completely demoralized and the effectiveness of the military force would be destroyed. On the other hand, when these responsibilities are thrown upon privates, serjeants and lieutenants, many foolish and wrong things will be done which cannot be passed over by higher authority.

I ask that this matter shall be formally and definitely considered by the Cabinet, in order that the excesses of the troops may be controlled and the discipline of the Army maintained.

2. I am advised that a system of identity cards, which every male in Ireland would have to take out and produce whenever required, would be a most decisive step against the Sinn Fein organization. I am advised that this measure is practicable. It was applied without the slightest difficulty in the districts occupied by our armies on the Rhine. A wanted man who is on the run dare not apply to the police or the military authorities for such a card, and would not get one without having his case and conduct searchingly investigated. On the other hand, a system of sweeps and roundings up in large areas would reveal those who had not taken out their tickets, and consequently lead to the arrest of many men now being sought in vain. This system might be applied in some districts first.

3. I consider that a system of passports should be introduced between Great Britain and Ireland. There is no reason why the Irish desperadoes should be permitted to transfer their operations over here at any moment they think fit, or come over here for rest and peace whenever the hunt gets too hot for them in Ireland.

4. I am advised that the methods by which the importation of arms and explosives into Ireland is now checked are extremely defective, and that there is no guarantee that considerable quantities are not passing in.

I conclude by repeating my request that these matters may be considered at an early date.

W. S. C.

THE WAR OFFICE,
3rd November, 1920.