WAR CABINET, 156.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, June 6, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The PRIME MINISTER (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON of KEDLESTONE, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.

The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.

The following were also present:—

The Right Hon. LORD ROBERT CECIL, K.C., M.P., Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Major-General F. B. MAURICE, C.B., Director of Military Operations (for Minutes 3 to 7).

The Right Hon. LORD RHONDDA, President of the Local Government Board (for Minute 9).

The Right Hon. H. A. L. FISHER, LL.D., President of the Board of Education (for Minute 9).

SIR E. CORNWALL, M.P., Chairman, National Health Insurance Joint Committee (for Minute 9).

Vice-Admiral SIR H. F. OLIVER, K.C.B., M.V.O., Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 3 to 7).

The Right Hon. C. ADDISON, M.D., M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minutes 4 to 9).

The Right Hon. R. MUNRO, KG, M.P., Secretary for Scotland (for Minute 9).

Major the Hon. W. ASTOR, M.P. (for Minute 9).

Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., Secretary.

Captain CLEMENT JONES, Assistant Secretary.

Mr. THOMAS JONES, Assistant Secretary.


They had before them the opinion of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to the effect that it was regrettable that the report should be published during the war, having regard to the reflections which it contained on many high officials, and on the manner in which the operations were planned and conducted; and the view of the Admiralty that, so far as the possible disclosure of naval information is concerned, they see no objection to the publication of the report.
In view of the terms of Section 6 of The Special Commission (Dardanelles and Mesopotamia) Act, 1916, the War Cabinet were of opinion that there was practically no option in regard to the publication, subject to such excisions as might be considered necessary in the public interest.

It was agreed, however, that the evidence ought not to be published.

The War Cabinet decided, however, that—

It might be necessary to accompany the publication of the report by a statement of the action to be taken by the Government on the various questions raised, and that further time was required to enable them to decide the nature of this action.

It was further decided that—

In the event of pressure in Parliament for immediate publication, a reply should be given in the sense that the Government had the matter under consideration in consultation with the appropriate Departments, and that an early decision will be given.

Salonica.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 155, Minute 5, the War Cabinet approved the terms of a letter from the Prime Minister to M. Ribot (Appendix).

It was decided that—

This letter should be sent out by a selected Messenger, who could explain the circumstances to such members of the French Government as he might meet, the regret of the British Government at having to take this decision, but their firm intention to adhere to it.

Italy and Asia Minor.

3. The Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs asked the authority of the War Cabinet to inform the Italian Ambassador that we should not insist on the “further effort” imposed by the War Cabinet as a condition of acceptance of the proposal of the Conference at St. Jean de Maurienne.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The question should be discussed in full as soon as the Chief of the Imperial General Staff could be present.

Air Raid.

4. The Director of Military Operations gave particulars regarding the Air Raid on the previous day on Shoeburyness and Sheerness, during which our casualties amounted to 12 killed (including 8 civilians) and 36 wounded. Beyond the setting on fire of a Naval Store at Sheerness there was no serious damage. Two enemy aeroplanes had been brought down by gunfire. The enemy’s objective appeared to be the Sheerness Dockyard. There was little doubt that our aeroplanes had prevented the enemy from penetrating further inland.

The Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff reported that on their return journey the enemy aeroplanes, including some that had been sent up by the enemy to reinforce the raiders on their return, were attacked by ten of our machines at Dunkirk, when two more of the hostile aeroplanes were destroyed and four were driven down out of control.

It was stated that there is nothing to prevent a fleet of, say, fifty aeroplanes coming to London, as London must be regarded as being
in the danger zone, but our aerial defences are being reinforced and
a barrage is being put up against day air raids.

Trouble in French Army.

5. The Director of Military Operations reported that there was
serious trouble, practically amounting to mutiny, in a number of
French regiments, partly as the result of Socialistic propaganda, partly
on the ground that native troops had been allowed to fire on strikers
in the neighbourhood of Paris. It was hoped that this disaffection
would be set right in five or six days.

Attack on Ostend.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 144, Minute 17, the Deputy-
Chief of the Naval Staff gave particulars of the damage done at
Ostend; workshops had been destroyed, jetties injured, and several
vessels sunk.

Submarines.

7. The Deputy-Chief of the Naval Staff made his usual state-
ment in regard to losses caused by submarines. He stated that
during May twenty-six vessels (106,000 tons) had been lost in the
Mediterranean, whilst seventy-eight British vessels (213,000 tons)
had been lost elsewhere.

Secretarial Arrangements for the eventual Peace Conference.

8. The War Cabinet considered a Note by the Secretary
(Paper G.T.-938) asking for authority to work out detailed
secretarial arrangements for the eventual Peace Conference, in order
that, whether that Conference takes place within months or years,
the more mechanical details necessary to the efficient service of the
British delegates might be thought out.
It was decided, however, that—
No action in this direction should be taken yet, as, in the
present phase of the war, it is considered undesirable to
take any steps which might create a peace atmosphere or
give the impression that the Government were making
preparations for a Peace Conference.

Proposed Ministry of Health.

9. The War Cabinet had before them the following documents
dealing with the proposal for a Ministry of Health:
(a.) Report of Sub-Committee of the Reconstruction Committee.
(b.) Memorandum by Sir Edwin Cornwall on (a), dated the
18th May, 1917.
(c.) Memorandum by Lord Milner (Paper G.T.-839).

Sir Edwin Cornwall developed the arguments set forth in his
memorandum, in which he agreed that the Health organisation of
the country should be established on a sounder and more effective
basis than at present, but expressed his view that it would be a
grave mistake to proceed on the lines proposed by the Sub-Committee
on Public Health, which would involve the break-up of the existing
organisation of National Health Insurance.

The President of the Local Government Board urged that
public opinion was strongly in favour of the new proposals. He
insisted that no break-up of the existing National Health organisation
was contemplated, as Sir E. Cornwall appeared to apprehend.
The scheme was to amalgamate the Local Government Board and the English and Welsh National Insurance Commissions in a single
Ministry of Health.

Dr. Addison urged the importance of taking action during the
war, particularly in view of the extent to which soldiers were already
taking up the hospital and sanatorium accommodation provided under the National Insurance Acts. He also laid stress on the fact that the existing organisation for National Insurance, including the various Approved Societies, would not be materially altered, but would continue their separate existence as part of a much larger organisation designed to promote national health in all its aspects.

The Secretary for Scotland stated that the proposals made would affect Scotland as well, but that he had not yet had an opportunity of consulting the Scottish Boards which would be concerned.

Having regard to the large volume of public opinion in favour of the proposals for a Ministry of Health, the War Cabinet, though recognising that ultimately the contributory character of the present scheme might be affected, were inclined to favour in principle the establishment of a Ministry of Health. They felt, however, that before taking a decision they required more information as to the attitude of the Approved Societies towards the change, and how they would be affected by the proposals.

It was agreed that—

The Prime Minister, in company with the members of the Sub-Committee, should receive a deputation from the Joint Committee of the Approved Societies and the Executive Committee of the National Approved Societies as proposed at their meeting held on the 21st May, at the office of the National Amalgamated Approved Society (the "National Insurance Gazette," 2nd June, 1917), and that the Secretary for Scotland should meantime make the necessary enquiries with regard to the Scottish aspect of the question.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
June 6, 1917.
APPENDIX.

Letter from the Prime Minister to M. Ribot.

My dear M. Ribot,

June 6, 1917.

The War Cabinet have been deeply concerned by a number of serious reports which they have received about the recent offensive operations on the Salonica front—reports which reflect very gravely on the fitness of General Sarrail for the command-in-chief of the great force which is there.

It has been part of the Allied strategy that early this spring offensive operations should be undertaken upon the Salonica front, and so far as we can ascertain it was generally agreed among all competent judges upon the spot that with proper leadership there was an excellent opportunity of dealing a heavy blow at the enemy. Yet the operations appear to have been a complete fiasco.

According to the reports which we have received from our representatives, the result was due to no want of courage or determination on the part of the troops engaged, but entirely to failure on the part of the higher command. There does not appear to have been any properly concerted plan of campaign, or any proper contact between General Sarrail and the armies under his command; the offensive seems to have consisted of a number of isolated operations, neither properly co-ordinated nor adequately supported, and to have been conducted without any attempt to press home the advantages gained.

The War Cabinet finds that these reports are fully borne out by the information which they have received from the Italians, the Russians, and the Serbs. It would further seem from these reports that General Sarrail, after more than a year and a half in command, has entirely lost the confidence of the Allied troops entrusted to his care.

In these circumstances, the War Cabinet have come to the conclusion that they are not justified in continuing to leave the very large British forces in the Balkans under General Sarrail’s command.

Speaking for myself, I must say that it is with the deepest regret I write in this sense. As you know, I have by no means been an opponent of General Sarrail. I was favourably impressed by him when we met in Rome, and I have on more than one occasion defended him in order that he might have every chance of carrying out the policy which was then agreed upon. And I wish to recognise without reserve the loyalty with which he has observed the pledges which he gave. But after reading the reports we have received, and making full further enquiries, I entirely concur with the War Cabinet that we should not be justified in leaving the British forces in the Balkans under the supreme command of General Sarrail.

We sincerely hope that the French Government will recognise the necessity for the appointment of another General in place of General Sarrail, and will issue immediate instructions to some competent officer on the spot to take over the command until the new Commander-in-Chief can arrive.

Yours sincerely,

D. LLOYD GEORGE.