WAR CABINET, 184.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, July 13, 1917, at 11 A.M.

Present:

THE PRIME MINISTER (in the Chair).

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

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

The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. Smuts, K.C.

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.P., M.D., Minister of Munitions (for Minute 12).

The Right Hon. J. Hodge, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minute 12).


The Right Hon. R. E. Prothero, M.V.O., M.P., President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries (for Minute 12).


Sir John Ellerman, Bart. (for Minute 1).

Captain R. Webb, R.N., Admiralty (for Minute 1).


Admiral Sir J. R. Jellicoe, G.C.B., O.M., G.C.V.O., First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 1 to 8).

Vice-Admiral Sir E. Geddes, K.C.B., Controller, Admiralty (for Minute 1).

Rear-Admiral A. L. Duff, C.B., Admiralty (for Minute 1).

The Right Hon. Sir J. Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minute 1).


Sir John Ellerman, Bart. (for Minute 1).


Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

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

Captain the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

[1385—184]
1. THE War Cabinet resumed the discussion, commenced on the previous day (War Cabinet, 183, Minute 2), on the Control of Merchant Shipping.

Sir Norman Hill stated that the result of the visit of Lord Inchcape, Sir John Ellerman and himself to the Admiralty, on the previous day, confirmed the view stated in the penultimate paragraph of the Admiralty Naval Staff Memorandum of the 1st July (Paper G.T.-1273), which reads—

“The whole of our war experience has shown that a fair measure of protection to shipping can only be guaranteed by a system of individual escort consisting of at least two fast patrol craft, or by arranging for ships to sail in groups with an escort on practically the same basis.”

This did away with the theory of areas of concentration and protected lanes, which had been the practice up to a recent date. He stated that the First Sea Lord had informed him that, provided eleven United States destroyers continued to be available, there was a sufficient force to provide four escorts every eight days. Sir Norman Hill therefore wished the War Cabinet to consider the question of only running such ships as could be given the fair measure of protection which such escorts provided. This would approximate to the use of one-half of our ships, the other half being placed in reserve in port or utilised on other and safer trade routes.

As regards the question of increasing the cargoes carried during the summer months, it was pointed out that previous to the war 98 tons weight was carried for each 100 tons net of shipping, whereas the weight carried had now been increased to about 140, and that by any further loading we should not derive any benefit, as the loss in speed would balance the gain in weight.

The First Sea Lord pointed out that twelve more destroyers might be available in three months' time for escort duties, but possibly this increase might be counterbalanced by the taking away of the United States destroyers to convoy their own troops. He further pointed out the danger of big enemy submarines working in mid-Atlantic, and the possibility that escorts would have to be provided for the whole journey, so that the crews of any ships sunk might be rescued, instead of being cast adrift hundreds of miles from land.

Lord Inchcape stated that he gathered from the information obtained at the Admiralty that the only practical means of combating the submarine menace (though many auxiliary methods of attack were employed) was the destroyer, and he strongly advocated a large building programme for destroyers, or other effective anti-submarine craft. At present we were only defending ourselves and not attacking, and if we continued to lose at the present rate it might be difficult to get merchant seamen to go to sea, owing to their moral breaking down.

Sir John Ellerman endorsed this proposal, and further pointed out the desirability, before the winter months came along, of only concentrating on the Atlantic trade such vessels as, by their construction and speed, were suitable to withstand the heavy weather that prevailed. Further, he was of opinion that if such were not done the convoy system, owing to the unequal speeds of the various ships forming the convoys, must break down.

The Shipping Controller stated that this aspect of the allocation of ships had not been lost sight of, that the convoy system had not been properly tried yet, and that a definite statement as to its efficacy could not be pronounced at present.

The War Cabinet were of opinion that the submarine is the one menace that might defeat us, and that, from the point of view of the whole alliance, it is most important to concentrate every possible effort on the protection of trade in the approaches to the United Kingdom.
The War Cabinet postponed the further consideration of this question until Friday next, the 20th July. In the meantime they decided that—

(a.) The Shipping Controller should be requested to go further into the matter of cutting down the number of ships actively employed, with a view to the utilisation of a portion of the ships as a reserve, bearing in view the various requirements of essential imports for the conduct of the war and the civil population.

(b.) The Admiralty should consider the redistribution of the anti-submarine craft at their disposal, with the object of setting free the eighty-eight destroyers required for the establishment of a daily system of convoys in the Atlantic with the least possible risk elsewhere. They should be prepared to report next Friday the degree of risk involved elsewhere by any such system of redistribution, in order that the War Cabinet might decide whether the risk is to be taken or not.

(c.) With a view to economy in force, the Admiralty should consider the degree of risk involved in the provision of smaller escorts for convoys than have hitherto been deemed essential.

The War Cabinet further requested—

The Shipping Controller, the First Sea Lord, Sir Norman Hill, Lord Inchcape, and Sir John Ellerman (with Captain Clement Jones as Secretary), to meet together and, having called to their assistance any merchant captains that they might think desirable, to report on the foregoing points on Friday next, 20th July, 1917.

The Eastern Front.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that the recent advance of the Russian Army had been over a length of 35 miles to a depth of 15 miles, and that their objective was probably Stryj. He added that he had been informed that the 11th Russian Army had not fought well, but that, on the whole, the Austrians had shown a similar tendency, and that the German troops captured were of poor quality. He had received information that the 81st Austrian Regiment had surrendered in a body, and that, as regards gunfire, the Russians were firing fifty rounds to one round of the enemy.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had received information from Petrograd that the effect of the offensive on all classes in Petrograd had been excellent, and that in a recent demonstration the Russian National Flag had been carried through the streets for the first time since the revolution in substitution for the Red Flag.

Russian Casualties.

3. It was stated that the Russian casualties during the first three days of their offensive had, as regards eight divisions, only been 5,000 men.

Mesopotamia.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that information had been received from the General Officer Commanding, Mesopotamia, to the effect that he had advanced from Feluja and found the Turks too strong, and had therefore proposed to retire to his original positions. Later information from General Maude led him to think, however, that the enemy contemplated
retreating, and he was therefore making his plans accordingly. General Maude stated that the percentage of sick in June was 7 per cent., as compared with 19 per cent. last year.

5. With reference to War Cabinet 181, Minute 15, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had received a report that the railways had been cut by Captain Lawrence, and that it was a highly praiseworthy operation.

6. The First Sea Lord stated that a telegram had been received that the special service vessel "Heligoland" had sunk a submarine yesterday off Land's End, and that the flotilla leader "Anzac," working in co-operation with destroyers attached to the Kite Balloon Section, had sunk another submarine 10 miles east of the Shetlands.

7. The First Sea Lord reported an air attack on the Dardanelles in which a tug had been sunk in Chanak Bay.

8. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet, with regard to the losses of merchant ships by enemy action, that the following was the percentage of German exaggerations over the facts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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9. The War Cabinet decided to enlarge the scope of the duties of the Mesopotamia Administration Committee, in order to enable them to deal with questions affecting the Middle East. Lord Milner, in view of his many other duties, expressed a desire to relinquish his membership of this Committee, and the War Cabinet decided—

To request Mr. Balfour to take his place, and to appoint General Macdonogh as the Military Representative on the Committee.

10. It was decided that—

The question of the control of military forces at Aden should be referred to this Committee.

11. It was decided that—

The question of the extension of the Quetta—Nushki Railway should be referred to this Committee.

12. With reference to War Cabinet 170, Minute 1, the War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War (Paper G.T.-1279) and a Memorandum by Sir Arthur Lee (Paper G.T.-1349). It was pointed out that the War Cabinet instructions of the 27th June was that the Army should furnish
5,000 men a week for ten weeks, beginning in the first week in
July, the first five contingents being men of previous agricultural
experience, or in any case men used to handling horses.

Lord Derby stated that 5,000 agriculturists in classes other than
Class A were not available, unless men were brought back from
France and Mesopotamia.

Lord Derby further protested against the policy of not discharging
men who were to be sent to agriculture, on the ground that it was a
form of industrial compulsion, that being a principle which he had
pledged himself not to support. He agreed that if the whole
question were reconsidered in six weeks' time, it could for the time
be looked upon as only a temporary expedient, and the men to be
considered as lent to agriculture in the same way as they were in
the spring.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The present system whereby the Army furnished men for
agriculture without discharging them should be con­tinued, on the understanding that it is temporary, until
the question of industrial compulsion is raised.

(b.) The Secretary of State for War should ascertain how many
trained agriculturists there are in the Army in England
as well as in France, and report to the War Cabinet as
soon as possible.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
July 13, 1917.