WAR CABINET, 240.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, September 27, 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 following were also present:

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 8 and 11).

The Right Hon. the EARL OF DERBY, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 4, and 11).

General SIR W. R. ROBERTSON, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 4, and 11).

Air Raids.

1. THE War Cabinet had a short discussion on the question of Air Raids, in the course of which it was pointed out that there is a tendency on the part of the public to crowd underground railway-stations in anticipation of an Air Raid, even when no warning has been issued. It was suggested that the authorities concerned should make better arrangements for regulating the use of the passages and platforms of the underground railways during a Raid. It was further suggested that the Press should be asked to emphasise the fact that the noise made by the anti-aircraft defensive...
artillery was often mistaken for the bursting of bombs, which gave the impression that the number of bombs dropped was far larger than the reality.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was authorised to thank the Press for the attitude that they had taken up towards recent attacks, and should invite them to call attention to the confusion between the bursting of bombs and fire of artillery.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that since the last battle the Germans had put in nine divisions, which indicated that they were using up their divisions very rapidly. On the previous day four strong counter-attacks had been made by the enemy between 4 and 7 P.M., the most severe of which was south of the Polygon Wood. All attacks had been repulsed and the German losses had been extremely heavy. Our troops had retained all the ground that they had captured.

The Prime Minister remarked on the poor condition of the German prisoners whom he had seen on the 26th instant, during his recent visit to the British front in Flanders, and upon the very good spirit which prevailed among all ranks of our own army that he had seen and conversed with. The enemy system of concrete block-houses, commonly known as “pill-boxes,” appeared to have been mastered by our troops.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read extracts from a telegram he had received from General Barter, giving General Alexieff’s reasons for declining to take office, among which was his insistence that the Commissaries should not be permitted to interfere in any way at the front. General Barter said that the opinion was held in certain quarters that the Bolsheviks might get into power, in which case there was a possibility of a separate peace. General Barter believed, however, that the Bolshevik Committees outside the Petrograd area would be opposed to this. It was further stated that M. Kerensky’s power was on the wane.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a communication from General Cadorna to the effect that he had given orders for the release of the British heavy guns which had been lent to him for the recent offensive. General Robertson said that he had suggested to General Cadorna that these guns might now be released, as they had been lent for the offensive; and, as it appeared that the Italian armies would now act on the defensive, he assumed they would no longer be required. General Cadorna, in his reply, had laid stress upon the fact that he alone was in a position to decide whether the offensive or the defensive should be adopted on his front.

As regards the disposal of the above guns, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that plans had been considered for reinforcing the Italians with heavy artillery next year, and, in view of our own deficiency in personnel, the alternative had been considered of sending guns to Italy without the personnel. This proposal was open to the objection that it would be difficult in such circumstances to secure the return of the guns. It had also been suggested that the personnel of these batteries might be made up partly of Italian and partly of British gunners. No final decision, however, had been reached. General Robertson said that, should the War Cabinet decide to send guns to Italy without their personnel, it would be necessary now to leave some of the guns recently lent with the Italians for instructional purposes, and General Delmé-Radcliffe had made a proposal to this effect.
As regards the proposal to divert British guns withdrawn from the Italian front to Palestine, General Robertson expressed himself as doubtful whether they could all be made use of in that theatre. Each battery required two trains for its transportation, and it was only possible to run seven or eight trains a day between Egypt and the Gaza front. On the other hand, the Prime Minister attached great importance to the necessity for giving heavy artillery support to General Allenby, in view of the formidable nature of the Turkish defences.

General Robertson stated that General Allenby had been given everything that he had asked for. With a view to a decision, however, lie undertook to ascertain from General Allenby how many guns he could make use of.

Seaplanes.

5. The First Sea Lord reported that two of three aircraft flown from the "Vindex" to attack the Zeppelins in the recent raid failed to return. A later report stated that one seaplane with two men had been towed to Holland; the other had probably been lost.

Submarines.

6. The First Sea Lord reported that the oiler "San Zaferino" was torpedoed 30 miles from the Smalls early that morning. The enemy submarine appeared on the surface about 1,000 yards away. Our "P 61" opened fire and obtained a hit. She then rammed the enemy at full speed, and the submarine sank stern first; a loud explosion followed. Two men subsequently came to the surface, one of whom, the commanding officer, was rescued. The oiler had been towed in.

Bombing Raids.

7. The First Sea Lord reported that bombing raids were made on the night of the 25th/26th instant at Thourout, Lichtervelde, and Cortemarck Junctions. Several direct hits had been observed in each case. All machines had returned safely.


8. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs referred to Sir Horace RumboF's telegram No. 866, dated the 24th September, 1917, in which it was stated that among the delegates said to be expected at a forthcoming International Peace Congress at Berne were three or more Englishmen, including Mr. Charles Buxton, Mr. J. A. Hobson, and Mr. W. H. Dickinson, M.P. Mr. Balfour asked for the instructions of the War Cabinet in the event of the British representatives applying to the Foreign Office for passports.

It was pointed out that it would be hardly consistent to grant passports to these delegates seeing that they had been refused to Labour representatives who had desired to attend the Stockholm Conference.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was authorised by the War Cabinet, in the above event, to refuse to issue passports, on the broad grounds that His Majesty's Government could not countenance unauthorised negotiations with the enemy.

Electoral Reform.

9. Mr. Barnes stated that at a meeting of the Labour Party, held yesterday, the future of the Electoral Reform Bill was discussed. A suggestion was made at the meeting that there was a plot on foot to delay the progress of the Bill in the House of Lords.

Lord Curzon stated that he knew of no such plot, but it was impossible to foretell what attitude the House of Lords might assume towards the Bill when it reached their Lordships.
Coal Miners' Demand for Increase of Wages.

10. The War Cabinet resumed their consideration of the negotiations which were proceeding between the Coal Controller and the Miners' Federation (War Cabinet 280, Minute 14).

Sir Albert Stanley reported that the Miners' delegates had decided to adhere to their demand for an advance of 10s. per week per man. The original demand for an advance of 25 per cent. would have cost from 25,000,000L. to 30,000,000L. per annum. The addition of 10s. would bring the average wage increase during the war up to about 65 per cent.

The Coal Controller stated that the men were out of hand, and the leaders were not leading, but were being pushed forward. There had been evidence of this in connection with recruiting arrangements, to which the leaders had agreed, but which the men had afterwards rejected. The men based their claims for the present increase on the fact that the cost of living had risen during the war by 33 per cent. They also alleged that 50 per cent. of the miners have to pay for tools and explosives, the cost of which had gone up during the war. In the view of the owners whom he had consulted, any stoppage would last for at least a fortnight. There was undoubtedly a fair proportion of loyal men among the miners, but once a strike began it would be difficult to stop the loyal men from joining their comrades from a sense of solidarity. With regard to stocks of coal in the country, the munition works might carry on, rather badly, for ten days. There was little space for much storage in the new factories. In recent strikes in the Midlands great pressure had been brought on the Department to secure the return of the men to work owing to the shortage of coal.

The Minister of Labour said that the aspect of the problem which he wished to emphasise was the effect any concession to the miners would have on other industries. The railwaymen were already passing resolutions in favour of an advance of 11. per week. The engineers have been making demands on the Ministry of Munitions. Demands for advances would, in fact, be general in October, and the cost of meeting these on the scale put forward by the miners would involve the country in tens of millions of pounds. In fact, it might become a question for consideration whether the cumulative effect of these universal demands might not even prevent us from carrying on the war.

The Cabinet were impressed with the gravity of the situation presented to them by the Board of Trade and the Minister of Labour. On the one hand, to concede the full demand of the miners would be a precedent for other workers who up to the present had been granted increases on a far less generous scale than the miners. Further, the miners were deliberately ignoring the important and costly efforts which were being made by the Government to reduce the price of commodities to the consumer. On the other hand, the Government could not embark on a conflict with the miners unless they were certain to bring it to a victorious issue. This, it was generally agreed, was more than doubtful, as the Government were bound to recognise the insistent demands by the war Departments, to whom even a fortnight's interruption of coal supplies would be perilous, and a strike running, as it probably would, to perhaps six weeks, disastrous to the conduct of the war. We had to bear in mind not only our own need of aeroplanes and ships, which were absolutely vital to us, but also the undesirable results which would follow if the supplies of coal to France and Italy were brought to a standstill. A great strike would therefore be equivalent to a military defeat. Nor would it perhaps be easy to convince the general public that the Government were justified in permitting
a colossal dislocation of the nation's industries in the midst of war for the sake of a difference of half-a-crown—for so it would be popularly represented.

The War Cabinet, while recognising that the demand by the miners was unreasonable and deeply to be deplored, decided that—

Owing to the exigencies of the war they had no option but to authorise the Coal Controller to negotiate up to a maximum of 1s. 8d. per day for men and 10d. per day for boys.*

The War Cabinet requested—

The President of the Board of Trade to report later on the question how far the extra cost of the coal, following on the present increase of wages, should be charged to industrial and domestic consumers respectively.

The question of securing in the agreement with the miners a condition that wages should in future be reduced pari passu with reductions in the cost of living was left open.

11. The Prime Minister drew the attention of the War Cabinet to the short summary of Conclusions reached at the Anglo-French Conference at Boulogne on the 25th September, 1917, which had already been circulated to the War Cabinet (Appendix). He also gave the War Cabinet particulars of his private conversations with M. Painlevé, the French President of the Council.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
September 27, 1917.

* Lord Curzon and Lord Milner asked that their dissent from this Conclusion might be recorded.
APPENDIX.

(I.C.-27.)

Conclusions of an Anglo-French Conference, held in the train at Boulogne, on September 25, 1917, at 3:15 P.M.

The Italian Front.

1. THE British and French Governments, while greatly regretting the decision of General Cadorna not to pursue the offensive operations, for which 100 French guns were recently sent to the Italian front, are agreed that no action can usefully be taken in order to obtain a reversal of this decision. The whole of the British and French heavy artillery will in consequence be withdrawn from the Italian front.

Extension of the British Line on the Western Front.

2. The British Government having accepted in principle the extension of the line held by the British army on the Western front, the two Governments are agreed that the question of the amount of the extension and the time at which it should take place should be left for arrangement between the two Commanders-in-chief.

Military Operations in Turkey.

3. General Foch expressed the view that an operation on the Turkish littoral, directed against the Turkish communications, can only succeed in conjunction with a successful advance by the British army in Palestine, combined with a successful holding operation in Mesopotamia. He undertook to study the question of such an operation designed to exploit any success which might be achieved by the Allied armies in Palestine and Mesopotamia, on the understanding that the British Government will render substantial assistance in the matter of shipping transport and naval escorts.

General Foch undertook to transmit his observations to the British Government by Monday next.

The Equipment of the Greek Army.

4. General Foch laid great stress on the importance to the Allies of equipping and preparing the Greek army, which, he pointed out, afforded an opportunity to the Allies for increasing their force at Salonica by three existing and three new divisions without the necessity of transporting them. In particular, he asked the British Government to undertake the supply of forty heavy guns.

The British Government undertook to consider this request in conjunction with other requests for heavy guns received from Russia, Roumania, and Italy.

Boulogne, September 26, 1917.