WAR CABINET, 253.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, October 19, 1917, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

THE PRIME MINISTER (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. the Earl of 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 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 Right Hon. Sir Edward Carson, K.C., M.P.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War.
Major-General Sir G. M. W. Macdonogh, K.C.M.G., C.B., Director of Military Intelligence (for Minutes 1 to 4).
Brigadier-General G. K. Cockerill, C.B., Sub-Director of Military Intelligence (for Minutes 1 to 4).
The Right Hon. Sir G. Cave, K.C., M.P., Secretary of State for Home Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 4).
Rear-Admiral W. R. Hall, C.B., R.N., Director of Intelligence Division, Admiralty (for Minutes 1, 2, 4).
The Right Hon. Sir J. MacLay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minutes 15, 16).
Sir Alan G. Anderson, K.B.E., Controller, Admiralty (for Minutes 15, 16).
The Right Hon. G. H. Roberts, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minute 1, 2, 4).
Mr. Joseph Davies (for Minutes 15, 16).

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Fleet Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
Captain the Hon. W. Ormsby Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.
Pacifist Activities in Great Britain.

1. THE War Cabinet had before them the following documents on the subject of pacifist activities in Great Britain:

   (a.) Notes of a Conference (Paper G.T.-733).
   (b.) Memorandum by Sir Edward Carson (Paper G.-157).
   (c.) Memorandum by the Ministry of Labour (Paper G.T.-2274).

While credit was given to the great value of the weekly reports of the Ministry of Labour, it was pointed out that these reports by no means covered the whole field of pacifist activities in this country. It was particularly desirable to investigate the sources from which the funds for purposes of anti-war propaganda were being obtained. For example, a case had recently been brought to light in which the pacifists had been refused the use of a hall in Bradford for the purpose of holding meetings, and, on receipt of the refusal, had bought the hall for the sum of £18,000. It was suspected that anti-war propaganda was being financed by wealthy men, who were looking forward to making money by opening up trade with Germany after the war, and it was rumoured that certain financiers were already entering into post-war contracts with a view to making profits out of German trade.

The Home Secretary stated that he had received a report from Scotland Yard on the whole subject, but that he was not wholly satisfied with it.

A great deal of information was being obtained by different Government Departments, notably by the War Office, and, though there was full co-operation between the Home Office, the War Office, and the Ministry of Labour, the information was not collated in such a form as to be readily available for members of the War Cabinet. It was suggested that international organisations required special attention, and that particular care should be taken to investigate the books of suspected institutions and of closed German banks.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Home Office should undertake the co-ordination and control of the investigation of all pacifist propaganda and of the wider subjects connected therewith, referred to above, and should submit a full report to the War Cabinet, who would then decide as to whether periodical reports should be submitted on the subject.

The Stockholm Conference.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 217, Minute 16, the Prime Minister stated that he had learned from French Ministers that documentary evidence had been obtained by them to the effect that the International Socialistic Conference at Stockholm had been engineered by the German Government.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Foreign Office should endeavour to obtain copies of these documents.

Prohibition of the Export of "The Nation."

3. With reference to War Cabinet 119, Minute 24, Lord Derby suggested that, in view of the recent improved tone and conduct of the "Nation," the embargo upon its export might now be removed.

The War Cabinet concurred in this proposal.
4. The War Cabinet had before them the following papers on the subject of visits of workers, farmers, and others to the theatres of war:

(a.) Memorandum by Sir Edward Carson (Paper G.T.—2268).
(b.) Memorandum by Mr. Munro (Paper G.T.—2265).
(c.) Memorandum by Mr. Prothero (Paper G.T.—2300).

The Secretary of State for War, while wholly favourable to the principle of affording facilities for persons to visit the British front and the devastated areas in France, stated that the main difficulty was one of accommodation. He had decided to send a special Commissioner to France to investigate this question and to report what could be done.

It was pointed out that visits to the front formed the very best education for propagandists in this country. Reports had been received showing that the meetings held by the War Aims Committee had already done good work, especially in Yorkshire.

The War Cabinet approved in principle that there should be greater facilities for war-workers, farmers, and especially for Members of Parliament, to visit the front; the details to be arranged between Sir Edward Carson and the Secretary of State for War.

5. The War Cabinet had before them a report, prepared at their request, by Sir Edward Carson (War Cabinet 247, Minute 6), on the subject of Bills dealing with property disturbed by the war, in which Sir Edward Carson advised that both the Bill to amend the Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Act, 1916, and the Bill to make further provision with respect to the requisition of ships in connection with the present war, are necessary, and, in his opinion, should be introduced separately. Sir Edward Carson also advised that the Order, under the Defence of the Realm Act, relating to the requisition of beans, &c. (War Cabinet 244, Minute 1), should be validated by Act of Parliament and not included in either of the Bills referred to above.

The War Cabinet approved Sir Edward Carson's report.

6. With reference to the figures for officers' casualties in August and September, published by the War Office by direction of the War Cabinet (War Cabinet 251, Minute 4), the Chief of the Imperial General Staff consulted the War Cabinet as to a Parliamentary question on the subject by Mr. Richard Lambert, quoting the figures published by the War Office, and suggesting that the list of casualties to officers should now be published for each of the other months of the current year.

The War Cabinet decided that—

It was not in the public interest to publish this information; if given, it would inevitably lead to a demand for the figures of casualties to other ranks. The answer should be in the sense that all casualties were published.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 250, Minute 2, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he was given to understand that the Admiralty would not be able to supply more than the 16 anti-aircraft guns previously promised, which would leave a shortage of 24.

The First Sea Lord stated that the matter was still under
consideration by the Board of Admiralty, who would, he thought, place the facts before the War Cabinet for decision.

Air Raid on Varssonaere Aerodrome.

8. The First Sea Lord reported that an air raid was carried out on Varssonaere Aerodrome on the morning of the 18th October, many bombs being dropped and sheds straddled. All our machines returned safely.

H.M.S. "Terror."

9. The First Sea Lord stated that the monitor "Terror" was hit by one or two torpedoes and two or three shells from destroyers on the night of the 18th-19th October while at anchor off Dunkirk. She had several compartments flooded, but the bulges with which she was fitted probably prevented her from foundering. The vessel would shortly be docked. The crew sustained no casualties.

Air Raid on Chanak.

10. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that the Rear-Admiral, Aegean Sea, reports that the arrival of the Kaiser at Chanak being expected, four bombing aeroplanes were sent to make an attack at midnight on the 17th-18th October. A bombing raid was made at dawn with all available force. A full report of operations had not yet been received, but one of our machines had not returned.

Submarines.

11. The First Sea Lord reported that—

(a.) On the 18th instant a seaplane had dropped four 100lb. bombs on a submarine while her periscope was showing in the vicinity of the Scillies. A large quantity of oil was afterwards observed.

(b.) A seaplane attacked a submarine in the vicinity of Portland on the 18th instant, two bombs exploding on the top of the wash while the submarine was submerging. The pilot believes the submarine was sunk. Oil was observed to rise.

(c.) H.M.S. "Afridi" reports having attacked a submarine in the vicinity of the North Varne Buoy. Four depth charges were dropped, after which dense oil appeared on the surface.

Losses by Submarines or Mines.

12. The First Sea Lord gave the following comparative figures of losses by submarines or mines, and arrivals and sailings for the two periods the 1st to 17th September inclusive and the 1st to 17th October inclusive:

In September the total arrivals and sailings amounted to 13,191. 50 British ships were sunk, of a total tonnage of 113,903 tons, and 36 Allied and neutral vessels, of 70,808 tons, making a grand total, including fishing vessels, of 184,716 tons.

For the period the 1st to 17th October inclusive the arrivals and sailings amounted to 11,376. 34 British ships were sunk, of a gross tonnage of 120,166 tons, and 32 Allied and neutral ships of a gross tonnage of 87,854 tons, making a grand total, including fishing vessels, of 70 ships of a tonnage of 207,037.

Attack on Convoy by German Light Cruisers.

13. With reference to War Cabinet 252, Minute 7, the First Sea Lord read to the War Cabinet the intercepted wireless message giving the German report on the convoy incident. He stated that he had received no further report from the Senior Naval Officer
in the Shetlands, and had telegraphed asking for any further particulars. In any case, the German report was incorrect in two matters, namely:

(a.) Their statement that the action took place in territorial waters, whereas it happened about sixty miles from land.

(b.) That all the convoy was sunk,—as we had certain knowledge that three of the convoy had reached harbour.

It was mentioned that this information would be known in the Scandinavian countries, and therefore it was desirable that we should publish our account of the incident.

The War Cabinet requested—

The First Lord of the Admiralty to issue a notice in the press as soon as the next-of-kin of those lost had been informed and all relevant facts had been ascertained from the Shetlands.

Russia: 14. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs read telegram No. 1649, dated the 18th October, from the British Ambassador, Petrograd, which, after describing the deplorable naval situation, ended with the suggestion that the man in the street is utterly ignorant of naval warfare, and that, if the Russian Fleet was destroyed without any attempt being made by the British Fleet to come to its assistance, the impression would gain ground that Russia had been abandoned by her Ally and that the only course left was to make peace with Germany.

The First Sea Lord explained the impossibility of the entry of the British Fleet into the Baltic. There was not a sufficient depth of water to allow the Fleet to pass through the Sound; the Little Belt was close to German territory, and to pass in safety through the Great Belt would necessitate infringing Danish neutrality by occupying Danish Islands. Further, there would be the difficulty of maintaining the communications of any force which succeeded in entering the Baltic.

The question was raised as to whether, if no direct assistance could be given, some diversion could be made in the North Sea to draw off the German Fleet. In this connection the First Sea Lord pointed out that the German Fleet had only detached a relatively small force against the Russians, including half-a-dozen Dreadnoughts; the Russians were putting up but a very feeble defence with their own forces, and there seems to be very little intelligence shown in the command; the four newest and best Russian Dreadnoughts had not yet moved. All our submarines in the Baltic were operating except one under repair. Apparently only two Russian submarines were moving. British forces had been operating for some time in the North Sea and Heligoland Bight with a view to attracting the Germans, but without result; short of attacking coast defences we were actually doing everything possible to tempt the German Fleet to engage us, and attacks on German coast defences, even if they could be undertaken, would take many months to prepare.

The War Cabinet decided that—

A telegram explaining these points should be sent to Russia, the material being supplied to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs by the First Lord of the Admiralty.

The question was discussed whether some "sting" should be put into this telegram, indicating that if they want assistance from us the Russians must at least make a determined effort on their own behalf.

Mr. Balfour undertook to consider this point, and to show the draft of the telegram to the Prime Minister.
Requisition of Vessels Building in the United States of America.

15. The War Cabinet had under consideration a letter from the Shipping Controller enclosing a telegram from his representative in the United States of America, as well as the draft of a reply on the subject of the requisition of vessels building in the United States of America for the British Government (Paper G.T.-2913).

The suggestion of the Shipping Controller was to accept the President's decision without question, to explain our position on the subject, and to point out that their action prevented us from helping our Allies to the same extent as heretofore. Sir J. Maclay said that information had just come to hand showing that the United States were actually opening new commercial lines with South America. There was evidence, indeed, that the United States were out for post-bellum development, of which they always suspected us.

The Controller of the Admiralty, while approving a full statement of the effect on supply of the action of the United States of America, favoured the maintenance of our contracts in order that opportunities might be obtained of representing, from time to time, to the Shipping Board the uses to which we had intended to devote the ships, as each of them was completed. It was important to press on the Americans the difficulties which would arise by the diversion of these ships from supply to transport.

The Shipping Controller expressed the view that it may become more important to bring wheat than troops from the United States. M. Clémentel had shown that the wheat situation in France was most critical, this year's harvest being 4,000,000 tons as against 3,000,000 in a normal year. The French were making a heavy demand upon us for assistance. The situation was equally grave in Italy, and during the last two days twenty Italian ships had been sent to America for wheat, thus depriving us of 100,000 tons of ore this month, and breaking the agreement into which they had entered.

The First Lord suggested that the message should also deal with the oil situation. The difficulties of supplying oil for our own needs and those of the Allies would be most seriously increased if oil-tankers were requisitioned.

The War Cabinet approved—

That the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should see the United States Ambassador, and should hand to him a statement incorporating into the Shipping Controller's draft message the additions suggested by the Controller of the Admiralty and the First Lord.

16. The Shipping Controller called attention to the inadvisability of proceeding with the building of oil-burning ships, owing to the difficulty of securing an adequate oil supply. We were bringing oil to the extent of from 80,000 to 100,000 tons a month in double bottoms, and but for the good-will of the United States we should have been in a very perilous position. Some time ago enemy submarines had sought out oil-tankers for special attack. He thought the whole position should be reviewed by the Admiralty.

The First Lord said that the comparative advantages of oil- and coal-burning craft had been repeatedly discussed, and a few months ago the Admiralty had ascertained that no change of the present programme could take effect before the end of 1918. The question was being considered whether it might not be desirable to build some coal-burning destroyers for delivery after the end of 1918.

17. The War Cabinet had before them a letter from Viscount Bryce to the Prime Minister, covering a memorial from a number of representative public men, suggesting the establishment of a small Committee of British and American experts to examine the estab-
lishment of some machinery for the preservation of a permanent peace by a combination of free, peace-loving nations (Paper G.T.-2283).

The War Cabinet decided—

To adjourn the matter until there had been an opportunity of discussing it with the representative of President Wilson, who was shortly expected in this country.

18. The War Cabinet had under consideration a note by the Secretary (Paper G.T.-2299) relative to the Forth-Clyde Canal, and decided that—

The question of the desirability of the construction of the Forth-Clyde Canal should be examined in all its aspects by the Minister of Reconstruction, in conjunction with the Government Departments concerned.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

October 19, 1917.