WAR CABINET, 261.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, October 31, 1917, at noon.

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

The following were also present:—


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).

The Right Hon. the Earl of DERBY, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 10).

Major-General F. B. MAURICE, C.B., Director of Military Operations (for Minutes 1 to 9).

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

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

Captain the Hon. W. ORMSBY-GORE, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

The Invasion of Italy.

1. WITH reference to War Cabinet 260, Minute 1, the Director of Military Operations stated that he had received a report from General Delmé-Radcliffe, giving General Cadorna's appreciation of the situation on the 21st October, and that such appreciation was confirmed by the telegrams that had since been received. He added that he was circulating this report for the information of members of the War Cabinet.

2. The Director of Military Operations stated that Lord Cavan had arrived in England, and the question arose as to the Command of the Expediency Force to Italy in case of its strength being considerably increased.

The War Cabinet decided that—

This question was one for the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Secretary of State for War.
The Western Front. 3. The Director of Military Operations stated that the recent offensive in Flanders had been quite successful, and that the Canadians had gained more than the objectives which they set out to take, and that Passchendaele was now enveloped from the north-west and west. General Maurice indicated on a plan the present situation on the Western Front, as well as the line it was desirable that we should reach before the termination of the 1917 offensive.

Air Offensive. 4. The Director of Military Operations stated that an attempt to bomb an area further to the eastward of Saarbriicken had not been very successful, as only a few machines were able to find their objective on account of the weather. They had bombed iron factories and gasworks at Pirmasens. The remainder of the machines returned with their bombs.

Palestine. 5. The Director of Military Operations informed the War Cabinet that the preliminary marches of General Allenby’s troops, in connection with the forthcoming offensive, had been very satisfactorily carried out. He further indicated on a map the line that the offensive would take.

Transfer of Serbians from Russia via Archangel. 6. With reference to War Cabinet 255, Minute 6, the Director of Military Operations stated that the transport of Serbians from Russia to the Salonica front was now proceeding satisfactorily.

Air raids. 7. The First Sea Lord reported that air raids were carried out on the 29th instant on Sparappelhoek and Varsennaere aerodromes. Visibility was excellent and accurate shooting appeared to have been made. All our machines returned safely.

Air raid on Dover and West Cliff. 8. The First Sea Lord reported that an enemy aeroplane dropped three bombs in Dover Harbour this morning. No damage resulted.

Command of Australian Troops. 9. The Prime Minister brought to the notice of the War Cabinet a copy of a telegram that had been received on the 25th September from the Prime Minister of the Australian Commonwealth to the effect that it was highly desirable that General Birdwood should be placed in the command of the whole of the Australian troops, such being the desire of the troops themselves, and in consequence the Australian Government urged it for the consideration of the War Cabinet.

Lord Derby stated that a telegram to this effect had been received through the Colonial Office, and that he had sent the same to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig for an expression of his opinion. The latter’s views had recently been received and had been communicated to the Colonial Office.

In view of this being a request from the Prime Minister of one of our Dominions, it was felt that the matter must be considered by the War Cabinet, and the War Cabinet therefore decided that—

The matter should be brought up for their consideration at an early date by the Secretary of State for War, the correspondence which has taken place relating thereto being circulated for their information.
Air Reorganisation.

10. With reference to War Cabinet 249, Minute 15, Mr. Bonar Law raised the question as to when it would be possible to introduce the Bill relative to the creation of an Air Ministry.

General Smuts stated that the Bill had been drafted and was apparently in order, and that the Admiralty had concurred in its provisions.

Lord Derby said that the War Office was considering the matter and he hoped to discuss it at a meeting of the Army Council next Friday. It was a matter that more particularly concerned the Army than the Navy, and particularly the General Staff of the Army, and he did not like recommending that the Bill should go forward without first having the advantage of General Sir William Robertson's opinions.

General Smuts fully concurred in this view, as the Army was more particularly affected than the Navy.

As Mr. Bonar Law anticipated that he might be asked questions in the House regarding this Bill, either to-day or to-morrow, the War Cabinet decided that—

In such a case the House should be informed that the Bill was deferred owing to the absence of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on the Continent, and that as soon as his views had been obtained the Bill would be laid before the House.

The War Cabinet further requested—

The Air Ministry to circulate the Bill forthwith for their information.

Food Situation in France and Italy.

11. With reference to War Cabinet 260, Minute 7, Mr. Balfour informed the War Cabinet that, in conjunction with Lord Milner, General Smuts, the President of the Board of Trade, and the Shipping Controller, a meeting had been held to consider the tonnage situation, which was very serious, indicating a reduction in next year's imports of a matter of 8,000,000 tons. This shortage was aggravated by the failure of the French and Italian harvests, and it was a question of how to meet the demands of the Governments of those two countries. M. Clémentel's view was that Great Britain should commit herself to guaranteeing the food supply of France and Italy, and that such food as may be required for this purpose should have a first lien on tonnage, after which M. Clémentel proposed that we should inform the United States Government of the arrangements we have made, and ask them to come to the assistance of Great Britain in the matter of shipping.

Mr. Balfour stated that the Committee had decided to divert as much shipping as possible, during the next two months, to provide the French and Italians with food, and that in the interim the Committee advocated that we should carry on negotiations with the United States Government with a view to their feeding France in the future, and for us to make the necessary arrangements to maintain the requisite supplies for Italy, which country was largely fed from India. He added that though the French harvest had only recently been gathered, and that therefore there should be no shortage at present, the Committee had been informed that the French are unable, for technical reasons, to thresh their wheat at the present moment. Mr. Balfour was of opinion that we must let the United States Government thoroughly understand that the tonnage question must be settled as a matter of policy; that it must be on the basis of a compromise between troops, munitions, foodstuffs and other essential supplies; and that it was no use their devoting themselves to troops if the European supplies were such that the Allies were unable to carry on the war; and that it must be further impressed upon them that the feeding of the European Allies is the task of all the Allies, including the United States.
Mr. Bonar Law stated that he had seen M. Clémentel, who had expressed his views in somewhat different sense. M. Clémentel had said that he did not suggest that we should feed France, but that, as we were now endeavouring to arrive at a common military policy, the first charge on the resources of the Allies should be the provision of sufficient food supplies to the several countries, with a view to keeping alive the population, and that we should share equally in proportion to our needs. Under the existing arrangements Great Britain will, in M. Clémentel's opinion, be far better supplied than France, and if we do not adopt some common action, we can hardly expect the United States to pay as much attention to our demands as we should wish. M. Clémentel had added that, whereas the normal French harvest was 9,400,000 tons, the 1917 harvest amounted to only 3,900,000 tons, and stated that this was due to the fact that France, in sending so many men into her army, had sacrificed the food supply of the country for the general good of the Allied cause, and that if such an effort was not recognised there would be a food revolution in France, and she would go out of the war. M. Clémentel had stated that the French Government were prepared to put on their population any food restrictions that we might introduce in Great Britain. M. Clémentel had urged upon Mr. Bonar Law that the two Governments should recognise their joint responsibility in this matter, and that they should sign the resolution as set out in the Appendix.

Lord Milner stated that undoubtedly the French were in more severe straits than we were as regards food supplies, and that the reason for their action in this matter at the present moment was that after, in the past, being practically self-supporting as to food supplies, they had just realised that they would have to become an importing country, and that they had not the shipping to meet their carrying requirements. Moreover, the peasants were hoarding wheat, and the question of collecting it and redistributing the same at a future date was one of enormous difficulty. There was a good deal, therefore, to be said for the view that it was sound policy to allow the peasants to hoard, as it would be bad economy to collect the wheat now with the necessity of redistributing part of it for the maintenance of the peasants later on. Lord Milner added that, after making allowance for the diversion of wheat ships to France and Italy during the next two months, we should have in the United Kingdom on the 1st February, 1918, fifteen weeks' supply.

General Smuts stated that the French were anxious to bind us to a definite arrangement, confirmed in writing, and that if we were so committed and the United States afterwards refused to assist us with shipping, the situation would be most disastrous, and our military effort would be paralysed through the necessity of devoting to essential food supplies shipping which otherwise would carry munitions and raw material.

The Prime Minister remarked that if a crisis had arisen in France in this respect it was the duty of that Government to apply, in the first instance, the remedies that could be provided at home before asking for our assistance, and if we signed the proposed agreement there was a danger that such action would not be taken by the French. He was convinced that we must impress on the Americans the grave situation as regards shipping, and the fact that, to enable the Allied countries to be fed, we should have to restrict to a certain extent our military effort in 1918, and that such effort could not be increased until the shipping situation had been restored, and that, in the meantime, they must be prepared, if requisite, to curtail their military effort to meet the material needs of the Allies as a whole.

The War Cabinet approved the recommendations of the Committee that—

(a.) For the next two months certain wheat ships, as may be arranged between the Wheat Commission, the Food Controller, and the Shipping Controller, should be
diverted from the United Kingdom to France and Italy, those Governments being informed by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of our action in the matter.

(b.) The President of the Board of Trade and the Shipping Controller should prepare a statement as to the shipping situation generally, and its inadequacy to meet the demands of the Allies.

(c.) Sir Albert Stanley should be requested to proceed to the United States of America at an early date to urge upon the United States Government the seriousness of the position, and ask for their help and co-operation.

The view was expressed that it was desirable that M. Clémentel should accompany Sir Albert Stanley.

(d.) The Prime Minister should ask Sir Gordon Hewart, the Solicitor-General, to take over the duties of the President of the Board of Trade during the absence of the latter.

12. With reference to War Cabinet 245, Minute 18, the War Cabinet had before them a note by the Secretary (Paper G.-164) and also a memorandum by Lord Curzon (Paper G.T.-2409) on the subject of the Zionist movement.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that he gathered that everyone was now agreed that, from a purely diplomatic and political point of view, it was desirable that some declaration favourable to the aspirations of the Jewish nationalists should now be made. The vast majority of Jews in Russia and America, as, indeed, all over the world, now appeared to be favourable to Zionism. If we could make a declaration favourable to such an ideal, we should be able to carry on extremely useful propaganda both in Russia and America. He gathered that the main arguments still put forward against Zionism were twofold:

(a.) That Palestine was inadequate to form a home for either the Jewish or any other people.

(b.) The difficulty felt with regard to the future position of Jews in Western countries.

With regard to the first, he understood that there were considerable differences of opinion among experts regarding the possibility of the settlement of any large population in Palestine, but he was informed that, if Palestine were scientifically developed, a very much larger population could be sustained than had existed during the period of Turkish misrule. As to the meaning of the words "national home," to which the Zionists attach so much importance, he understood it to mean some form of British, American, or other protectorate, under which full facilities would be given to the Jews to work out their own salvation and to build up, by means of education, agriculture, and industry, a real centre of national culture and focus of national life. It did not necessarily involve the early establishment of an independent Jewish State, which was a matter for gradual development in accordance with the ordinary laws of political evolution.

With regard to the second point, he felt that, so far from Zionism hindering the process of assimilation in Western countries, the truer parallel was to be found in the position of an Englishman who leaves his country to establish a permanent home in the United States. In the latter case there was no difficulty in the Englishman or his children becoming full nationals of the United States, whereas, in the present position of Jewry, the assimilation was often felt to be incomplete, and any danger of a double allegiance or non-national outlook would be eliminated.

Lord Curzon stated that he admitted the force of the diplomatic arguments in favour of expressing sympathy, and agreed that the
bulk of the Jews held Zionist rather than anti-Zionist opinions. He added that he did not agree with the attitude taken up by Mr. Montagu. On the other hand, he could not share the optimistic views held regarding the future of Palestine. These views were not merely the result of his own personal experiences of travel in that country, but of careful investigations from persons who had lived for many years in the country. He feared that by the suggested declaration we should be raising false expectations which could never be realised. He attached great importance to the necessity of retaining the Christian and Moslem Holy Places in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and, if this were to be effectually done, he did not see how the Jewish people could have a political capital in Palestine. However, he recognised that some expression of sympathy with Jewish aspirations would be a valuable adjunct to our propaganda, though he thought that we should be guarded in the language used in giving expression to such sympathy.

The War Cabinet authorised—

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to take a suitable opportunity of making the following declaration of sympathy with the Zionist aspirations:

“His Majesty’s Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 31, 1917.
APPENDIX.

Proposed Agreement by M. Clémentel between the British and French Governments.

1. LES deux Gouvernements sont d'accord, tout en réservant leurs droits de souveraineté sur les navires battant leurs pavillons respectifs, pour que les moyens de transports maritimes à leur disposition soient utilisés en commun, en vue de satisfaire aux besoins reconnus entre eux comme étant les plus urgents au cours des ajustements périodiques qui devront intervenir. À cet effet, ils poursuivent en ce moment l'établissement de leurs programmes communs d'importations en vue de les réduire au minimum indispensable.

2. Étant donnée l'urgence actuelle du problème de ravitaillement pour la Grande-Bretagne, la France et l'Italie, les deux Gouvernements ont décidé de considérer jusqu'à nouvel ordre leurs programmes communs d'importations pour la consommation humaine établis de janvier à août 1918, comme devant avoir la priorité sur toutes les autres importations et prendront les mesures nécessaires pour réajuster leur tonnage en conséquence.

Entre-temps, la Grande-Bretagne, afin de faire face à la crise immédiate, déroulera sur la France et l'Italie des navires actuellement alloués aux importations du Royaume-Uni.

3. Les Gouvernements Britannique et Français décident de faire connaître au plus tôt au Gouvernement des États-Unis d'Amérique l'arrangement ci-dessus, de lui demander de concert de participer à cet accord au même titre qu'eux-mêmes et de joindre son effort à celui de la Grande-Bretagne et de la France, en vue d'accreitre le tonnage au service des Alliés.

(Signé) CLÉMENTEL.