WAR CABINET, 279.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, November 21, 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 Right Hon. George N. Barnes, M.P.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, OM; M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.
The Right Hon. the Earl of DERBY, KG., SIR L. WORTHINGTON EVANS, Bart., M.P., G.C.V.O., O.B., Secretary of State for War.

The Western Front.

1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff described in detail the extremely successful action on the Arras-Cambrai front.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff pointed out that these operations on the Western Front might call for an early revision of the decision with regard to the despatch of further Divisions to Italy.

The War Cabinet decided that—

Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig should be informed that he might use the two Divisions now under orders, but that he was to get together two others, not necessarily in full
strength, for despatch, if required; and that, meanwhile, the French should be allowed to use the railway facilities to Italy now allotted to us, for the despatch of French Divisions, and of heavy artillery, or anything else useful and needed, pending a definite decision whether more British Divisions are to be sent, under the circumstances.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Allenby was now within 6 or 7 miles of Jerusalem, to the North-West.

East Africa.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, after referring to the published communiqué announcing the surrender of a good many Germans and natives in East Africa, stated that not more than about 250 Germans, with some 3,000 natives, remained in the field. He drew attention to a telegram from General Van Deventer suggesting that he should now make some offer to General von Lettow for surrender; and he also suggested that very good results would follow if we could make an announcement that German East Africa would not be surrendered to Germany at the end of the war.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies pointed out that, by making such a Proclamation as was proposed, the natives would be safeguarded against subsequent reprisals by the Germans, and that many lives might be spared in the exhausting operations in this difficult country if the natives now with the Germans could be induced to desert.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that the question of the German African colonies was extremely difficult. There were three lines of argument which had to be taken into account:

(a) Could we, under any circumstances, afford to allow Germany the possession of good submarine bases, such as Dar-es-Salam, after the war?
(b) Could we allow the native population to be retransferred against their will to German domination?
(c) Could the civilised world as a whole regard with equanimity the avowed and expressed intentions of Germany to create a large and well-disciplined black army in the heart of Africa, which would be in a position to threaten not merely the whole of that continent, but white civilisation also?

The one difficulty we had to face was the suggestion, so freely put about by the enemy both abroad and in our midst, that the Allies, and more particularly Great Britain, were out for plunder and further territorial acquisitions. He thought that the Cabinet should consider very carefully the proposal for the internationalisation of the former German colonies in Africa, which would have the effect of preventing the creation of a naval and military menace, while at the same time the most valuable raw materials would be available for the factories of the world, and not merely of Germany.

This question was adjourned until the following day, pending a conversation which the Prime Minister and Mr. Balfour were to hold with Colonel House at Downing Street that afternoon.

War Aims.

4. Sir Edward Carson said that his survey of our propaganda led him to believe that the pacifists were greatly assisted by the lack of definiteness in regard to our territorial war aims.
Mr. Barnes supported this view, and the Cabinet felt that this, again, was a matter which could be better discussed after the beforementioned interview with Colonel House.

3. On the recommendation of the Secretary of State for War and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the War Cabinet approved the appointment of Lieutenant-General Sir W.R. Marshall, K.C.B., to fill the vacancy caused by the death of General Sir Stanley Maude.

The War Cabinet further authorised the Secretary of State for War to make enquiries in regard to the pecuniary circumstances of Lady Maude, and took the view that in this case it was most desirable that the State should act generously in this respect.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 277, Minute 7, attention was drawn to a further report from Lieutenant-Colonel Plunkett confirming previous accounts in regard to the grave state of affairs at Salonica, largely due to the command of General Sarrail.

It was pointed out that, in addition to the other causes of weakness, the British troops were saturated with malaria.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that his liaison officer at Paris had seen M. Clemenceau, who had expressed misgivings with regard to the situation, and had asked whether the British Government were satisfied with the existing state of affairs. What disturbed him most was the difficulty of obtaining any information. General Sarrail had not yet sent the report promised by the French Government at Rapallo (I.C.—31).

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Prime Minister should send a strongly-worded personal letter to M. Clemenceau, drawing his attention to the previous letters that had passed regarding General Sarrail and the seriousness of the situation.

With reference to the report by Lieutenant-Colonel E. A. Plunkett, dated the 17th November, 1917 (Paper G.T.—2087), Lord Curzon drew attention to the fact that certain of our troops were stationed in unhealthy areas, whereas other battalions were more favourably placed, the result being that the moral of the former was not likely to be maintained at such a high level.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff undertook to enquire into the practicability of periodical exchanges between the troops in the two areas.

7. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, with reference to War Cabinet 248, Minute 7, drew attention to the mischievous attitude adopted by the Northcliffe press in regard to the publication of Sir Archibald Murray's last despatch. He explained that it had been quite impossible, on military grounds, to publish this despatch, in view of the fact that General Allenby's position before the capture of Gaza was identically that which was described in such detail by Sir Archibald Murray.

The War Cabinet decided that—

No notice should be taken of the articles in question.

8. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Plumer's last telegrams were most satisfactory; the Italians had been counter-attacking, and the situation was better from every point of view.
9. Sir Edward Carson drew attention to the procedure of the War Office in cases of the next-of-kin of soldiers shot for cowardice or other crimes in the field, whereby a notification of the fact is made and all pensions withdrawn.

The War Cabinet requested—

The Secretary of State for War to arrange that in future the communications made to the dependants should not convey that the man had been shot, but that he had died on service;

and decided that—

Subject to the agreement of the Minister of Pensions, the pensions should be paid in the same manner as to soldiers who had died on active service, and that the same should apply as regards officers.

The War Cabinet further decided that—

This decision should be made retrospective.

Mr. Barnes undertook to discuss this matter with the Minister of Pensions, and was given full powers to make all arrangements.

Submarines.

10. The First Sea Lord reported two engagements with enemy submarines, during which seaplanes had dropped bombs in their vicinity, with the possibility that one of the submarines was seriously damaged.

H.M.S. "Candytuff."

11. The First Sea Lord reported that the sloop "Candytuff" was torpedoed in the Mediterranean on the 18th instant, 4 officers and 11 men being killed. The commanding officer states that he is of opinion that the enemy submarine was sunk by gunfire.

Light Cruiser Action in the North Sea.

12. With reference to War Cabinet 277, Minute 12, the First Sea Lord stated that 22 German prisoners, of whom 1 officer and 5 men were naval ratings, had been taken during the recent engagement in the Heligoland Bight. They were part of the crew of an outpost vessel.

British Submarines in the Baltic.

13. With reference to War Cabinet 265, Minute 8, the First Sea Lord stated that the Admiralty had under careful consideration the question of the British submarines in the Baltic. The minefields in Danish waters would probably prevent the submarines leaving, but it was possible to cause the submarines to be interned in a neutral country, and thus release their crews. Admiral Stanley had been asked for his views on the subject.

The Italian Front.

14. The First Sea Lord stated that British monitors based on Venice had bombarded and destroyed a bridge over the Piave River.

U.S.A. Destroyer "Chauncey."

15. The First Sea Lord stated that the U.S.A. destroyer "Chauncey" had been in collision with a transport, and had been sunk, 3 officers and 18 men being lost.

Roumania.

16. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs drew the attention of the War Cabinet to a very important telegram that had been received from Roumania (No. 690, dated the 17th November, 1917).
He attached the greatest importance to our refusal to accept any idea of countenancing a separate peace with Germany, and he thought that the only practical way out of the difficulty was to get into touch with General Kaledin and M. Savinkoff, who was now with the former, through Roumania, with a view to obtaining their support for the Roumanians.

In this connection Sir Edward Carson reported that he had had an important meeting on the previous day with Count Horodyski, a Polish leader, at which the Director of Military Intelligence (General Macdouogh) had been present. As a result of this meeting, he believed that the formation of a nucleus of Poles, Cossacks, Roumanians, and Armenians was a practical proposition, which might be realised, should we be able to get at General Kaledin through the Roumanians and through America. It was quite clear that the British were most unpopular in Russia at the present moment, and that it was questionable policy for Great Britain to approach General Kaledin, who was still only the leader of a faction, officially or direct.

The importance was urged of our doing nothing which appeared to take sides in the internal dispute now raging in Russia.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Chief of the Imperial Staff should confer with his Intelligence Department, with a view to selecting an individual to be sent, either from this country or from Roumania, to get into touch with General Kaledin.

With regard to Sir Edward Carson's intimation referred to in the previous Minute, concerning the Poles, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs entered a caveat regarding Count Horodyski. The latter was urging us to make a further announcement in favour of an independent Poland and an independent Bohemia. Mr. Balfour thought that we should not go further than the very strong declaration made recently by us on the anniversary of the death of the Polish patriot Kosciusko. As far as his personal sympathies were concerned, although he did not in any way wish to minimise the efforts of many of the Poles, he thought the Bohemians were deserving of the greatest consideration from the Allies. They had made great sacrifices for the Allies, but he feared that, owing to their geographical position, the ideal of independence appeared chimerical; the utmost that they could hope for being home rule within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Supply of Guns to Italy.

18. The War Cabinet had under consideration a telegram from Mr. Churchill in Paris (Paper G.T. 2830) relative to the supply of rifles, guns, and ammunition to Italy, as well as a request by the Minister of Munitions to Lord Derby that, if the War Cabinet decided on the principle of affording aid, General Furse might be authorised to settle the main details direct with Mr. Churchill.

Lord Derby stated that he had sent General Furse across to France to confer with Mr. Churchill on the subject, and that he was prepared to endorse any arrangement that may be agreed to by General Furse. If such arrangement did not cover the whole of the Italian demands, Lord Derby considered that the question of such further supply should be considered by the Committee on the Allocation of Guns in relation to the demands put forward by our own armies and by those of the other Allied Governments (War Cabinet 247, Minute 7).

The War Cabinet decided that—

Sir L. Worthington Evans should telegraph to Mr. Churchill that the War Cabinet would support any arrangement he might make with the Italians, if agreed to by General
Palestine.

19. With reference to War Cabinet 277, Minute 6, Lord Curzon stated that a Proclamation had been prepared and that it was most important that, if and when Jerusalem were captured, the news should be made known in a way calculated favourably to impress India and the Mohammedan world, and to satisfy them that the Moslem Holy Places would be protected.

The War Cabinet decided that—

No statement as to the capture or imminent capture of Jerusalem should be issued to the press before the Prime Minister had publicly had an opportunity of giving assurances as to the protection to be afforded to the Holy Places of the Moslems and Christians.

Wages in Engineering and Foundry Trades.

20. With reference to War Cabinet 252, Minute 1, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Minister of Munitions on the question of extending to semi-skilled and unskilled time-workers the bonus of 12½ per cent. recently granted to skilled time-workers in the engineering and foundry trades.

It was explained that a decision was urgently required, as the men in some areas were being kept at work with difficulty. The present demand arose directly out of the recent concession of 12½ per cent. to skilled workers. Subsequent to this decision, the Committee on Production had granted a further general advance of 5s. The result was that those grades which had only received the advance of 5s. were asking for the bonus of 12½ per cent. If this were granted, the relative positions of the skilled and semi-skilled would be once again what it was before the bonus was given. Further, the sums involved in the present demand were very large. The whole position was unsatisfactory and showed that some co-ordination of the Departments dealing with Labour was very much needed.

The War Cabinet authorised—

Lord Milner and Mr. Barnes to decide whether or not the advance now asked for should be granted.

Inter-Allied Council.

21. With reference to War Cabinet 274, Minute 11, Mr. Austen Chamberlain stated that he had been asked by Mr. Crosby, the chairman of the Inter-Allied Council, whether he could make it convenient to attend meetings of the Council in Paris, as it was desired by the French authorities to hold the same there. Mr. Chamberlain added that the matter was not a question of his convenience, but that he understood it was the wish of the British Government that the meetings of the Council should be held in London, as it was, on the whole, the most suitable place for the purpose.

It was pointed out that it was quite impossible for General Smuts, who was a member of the Council, to attend meetings in Paris, in view of his manifold duties elsewhere.
The War Cabinet decided—
To adhere to the original arrangement, namely, that the headquarters of the Council should be in London, and requested Mr. Austen Chamberlain so to inform Mr. Crosby.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
November 21, 1917.