WAR CABINET, 286.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, November 29, 1917, at 11.30 A.M.

Present:
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P. (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kedleston, K.G., G.C.S.I., C.C.I.E.
The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. Smuts, K.C.
The Right Hon. Sir E. 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 F. B. Maurice, C.B., Director of Military Operations.
Vice-Admiral Sir R. E. Wemyss, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., Deputy First Sea Lord.

Sir A. C. Geddes, K.C.B., Minister of National Service (for Minute 10).
The Right Hon. G. H. Roberts, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minute 10).
Sir David Shackleton, K.C.B., Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour (for Minute 10).

Lieutenant-Colonel W. Dally Jones, C.M.G., Acting Secretary.
Captain the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.
Fleet Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.

The Western Front.

1. The Director of Military Operations reported that in the Cambrai theatre the Germans had, at the commencement of our offensive, 3 divisions. Since the commencement of the offensive they had brought up 10 further divisions. Of these 13 divisions 6 had been withdrawn, leaving 7 in the line. Sir Douglas Haig had engaged 10 of his divisions, and had withdrawn 2, leaving 8 in the line. Our divisions were stronger than the German divisions.

The Invasion of Italy.

2. The Director of Military Operations intimated that there were indications of an enemy attack on the River Piave at the point immediately south of the sector occupied by our troops. The enemy had thrown eleven bridges across different arms of the river, which in that neighbourhood form a number of islands. All enemy troops in the threatened area were Austrians.
Palestine.

3. The Director of Military Operations reported the receipt of a full summary of the situation to date from General Allenby. The latter estimated the Turkish forces opposed to him on the 31st October at 41,000 rifles and 300 guns. He estimated his subsequent captures at 10,000 prisoners and 80 guns, the number of enemy killed and wounded being probably about 15,000. In addition to these he had captured 20 aeroplanes and a great quantity of ammunition and stores. No enemy aircraft had been seen in the air for many days. His own position he estimated as follows: On 31st October he had 96,000 effectives, and he still had 78,000. The brunt of the work had fallen upon two mounted divisions and upon two infantry divisions, viz., the 52nd and the 75th. The latter two required a rest, and were now being relieved by other divisions. These were in excellent order, with the exception of a division which had recently arrived from Salonica, in which malaria was somewhat prevalent. The railway communication with Egypt now extended to a point 10 miles north of Gaza, and was being pushed on. Supplies were being landed at the mouth of the Wadi Sukeir.

Among the captures from the enemy were six locomotives and a number of wagons. The main remaining enemy force was concentrated in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and, owing to his great superiority in numbers, material, and aeroplanes, General Allenby would shortly be in a position to deal with them. Should he prove successful in capturing Jerusalem he would be able to take up a strong line somewhat to the north of it, between the Jordan and the sea, which would have the advantage of having a lateral railway in its rear, viz., the Jaffa–Jerusalem Railway, which could be easily and quickly repaired.

Questioned regarding enemy reinforcements, General Maurice stated that it was estimated that there were in the vicinity of Aleppo one weak German division and two weak Turkish divisions. One other weak German division was believed to be now moving to Nablus. The General Staff calculated that it would take from fourteen to sixteen days to move a Turkish division from Aleppo to Nablus, from which point they would have to march south. It was stated that the Turkish forces lately at Hebron had retired on Jerusalem. Arrangements had been made for Arab co-operation in blowing up portions of the Hedjaz Railway east of the Jordan, and also between Aleppo and Damascus. Nearly all the tribes were co-operating, but there appeared little prospect of the Druses coming to our assistance until the British advance had reached a more northerly point.

It was pointed out that, judging by experience in other theatres of the war, General Allenby’s superiority in the air should prove a valuable adjunct in embarrassing a retiring Turkish army by engaging them from a low elevation whilst they were on the move on their coastal line.

General Maurice stated that he gathered that General Allenby had been making full use of this arm, but that the highlands of Judea and Samaria were of such a nature that it was extremely difficult to find landing grounds. General Allenby had all the aeroplanes he had asked for, and no further demands had been made.

East Africa.

4. The Director of Military Operations drew the attention of the War Cabinet to the published communiqué in that morning’s press; since then a further success had been reported, and the only enemy forces now in the field in this theatre were 2,000 men under von Lettow, now on the Portuguese frontier.

Shipping Losses.

5. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that there had been heavy losses at sea by the action of enemy submarines between noon 27th and noon 28th instant. 20,932 British and 12,055 Allied tons of shipping had been sunk; and 10,583 tons of British shipping damaged by torpedo, but it was hoped the latter could be repaired.
6. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that H.M.S. "Lizard" had fired at a party of Turks from the shore to the north of Jaffa.

7. The War Cabinet had before them a number of telegrams from Petrograd and Jassy, including the following:—

No. 1874 from Sir G. Buchanan, dated 26th November.
No. 1878.
No. 1881.
No. 706 from Sir G. Barclay, dated 26th.
No. 710.
No. 711, the military attaché at Jassy, dated 27th November.

Lord Robert Cecil stated that, apart from the large issues of policy raised in these telegrams, there were two minor questions which could be separately dealt with. The first was the demand put forward by M. Trotsky for the release of Chichirin and Petroff, who are interned in this country, and the virtual threat of reprisals against British subjects in Russia should the two agitators not be released. To release them at Trotsky's bidding would greatly add to his prestige, and would be tantamount to a recognition of his Government. The second question was the complaint made by Sir G. Buchanan that General Barter had put the Ambassador in a very embarrassing position by the threat of "serious consequences," which accompanied the note to the Commander-in-Chief protesting against Russia's infraction of the 1914 Agreement.

The Director of Military Operations said that probably General Barter was influenced by the fact that M. Clemenceau had wired to the Head of the French Mission telling him to take energetic action, and adding that the Commander-in-Chief would be supported in any action he took against Petrograd.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) No notice should be taken of M. Trotsky's request to release Chichirin and Petroff.
(b.) The Secretary of State for War should enquire into the complaint against General Barter, and that a suitable telegram should be sent to Sir G. Buchanan.

The War Cabinet next considered the general Russian situation, especially as set forth in telegrams Nos. 1878 and 1881 from Petrograd and No. 711 from Jassy. M. Trotsky had issued to the Military Attachés of Allied Powers, on 27th November, a note stating that he and his supporters were endeavouring to bring about a general and not a separate armistice, but that they might be driven to a separate armistice by the Allies if they refused to negotiate. If the Allied Governments would not recognise the Bolshevists the latter would appeal to the peoples as against their Governments. Sir G. Buchanan urged that a reply should be issued immediately to this "insolent communication," pointing out that Trotsky's proposal for a general armistice reached the British Embassy nineteen hours after the Commander-in-Chief had opened pourparlers with the enemy, and that the Allies were determined to continue the war until a permanent peace had been obtained. Sir G. Buchanan further urged the Government that, as the situation was now desperate, it was advisable to set Russia free from her agreement with the Allies, so that she could act as she chose, and decide to purchase peace on Germany's terms or fight on with the Allies. The policy of the Bolshevists was to divide Russia and Britain, and so pave the way for what would virtually be a German protectorate over the former. The course he recommended, if adopted, would make it impossible for the Bolshevists to reproach the Allies with
driving Russian soldiers to slaughter for their Imperialist aims. In the telegram sent to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the military attaché at Jassy proposed that, if it were found that Kaledin was well-disposed to the Allies, a French and British Mission, fully accredited, should be sent to his headquarters; that financial support up to 10,000,000L. should be guaranteed to Kaledin; and, generally, that the British Mission should have full power to act without waiting instructions from England.

The War Cabinet were informed that a message had been stopped by the Press Bureau from Trotski, addressed to the Ambassadors of Norway, Holland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark, asking that pressure should be brought to bear by the Socialist and working-class organisations in these countries in favour of peace.

Lord Robert Cecil said it was important that the Cabinet should arrive at a decision at the earliest possible moment on the questions raised in the above telegrams. Kaledin was in command of the resources of Russia, and if he and his Cossacks could be united against the Germans, supplies would thereby be prevented from reaching the enemy. There was no evidence to show that the Bolsheviks had anything like general support throughout Russia. There was reason for thinking that the peasants were against the Bolsheviks. Kaledin had with him Alexieff, and possibly Savinkoff and Rodzianko. The one man with an organised force was Kaledin, and, as Chief of the Cossacks, he had great prestige. He (Lord Robert Cecil) would send General Ballard to Kaledin, and, if he found Kaledin genuinely in favour of the Allies, General Ballard should be authorised to take what steps he deemed wise, and to incur expenditure up to 10,000,000L.

Some members of the War Cabinet were impressed with the objections to the policy of entering into active co-operation with Kaledin without further information. Steps had been taken to obtain such information, but it had not yet been received. Little was definitely known of Kaledin's personality, and there were signs that the Cossacks were not prepared to fight. The scheme, on General Ballard's admission, was not one which could be regarded as hopeful, and its only result might be to drive the Russian Government definitely into the arms of Germany. If we waited for a short time we should learn the terms offered by Germany, and these might open the eyes of the Russian people to what a German peace really meant.

Alternative courses open were to follow Sir G. Buchanan's advice or to wait a little longer in the hope that the situation would subsequently become clearer. In any case, the subject was one which should be referred to the conference now meeting in Paris.

Attention was called to the position of the Roumanian army, and some members thought there was less objection to securing the support of Kaledin for the Roumanian Army than for an open expedition against the Bolsheviks. Against the policy of drift, it was urged that for the past eight months we had sedulously refrained from intervening in the policy of the Russian Government, and we were now confronted with the fact that the Russians were negotiating with the German Government. It had also to be remembered that Kaledin had no information as to what were our views on the Russian situation.

It was generally agreed that, if Kaledin were approached, two Missions would not be required. General Ballard and a French representative should suffice.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should send a message to Paris calling the attention of the Prime Minister, Mr. Balfour, and Lord Milner to the telegrams referred to above, and should add that the members of the War Cabinet in London were divided in opinion as
to the immediate steps to be taken, some being in favour of authorising General Ballard to proceed on the lines indicated by him, others being in favour of waiting until further information was received.

8. Sir Edward Carson called attention to a number of wireless messages from Russia—chiefly Bolshevik propaganda—which had been received by the Press Bureau, the publication of which he had temporarily stopped. He read examples of the messages, and also the following extract from a letter which had been received from Sir Frank Swettenham:

"The whole question of censoring or stopping such press messages as are now coming to this office in regard to Russian affairs is so full of difficulty that there appears to be only one way to deal with it, and that is to authorise us to pass, stop, or censor all such messages at our discretion, without regard to existing instructions that cablegrams dealing with foreign affairs are to be passed to the addressess uncensored. If this is done, we think it would be necessary to make some public announcement on the subject, though what constitutes 'foreign affairs' in this connection is almost impossible to determine. The alternative to this course is to pass everything of the kind which comes from a press correspondent and cannot be dealt with on grounds other than those of foreign affairs."

Sir Edward Carson explained that some of the messages were appeals to the people as against their Governments, and were in many respects of a violent character. He had discussed the question with Mr. Balfour and Lord Milner before their departure for Paris, and they were against publication.

Lord Robert Cecil said that in the autumn of 1915 he had obtained authority to remove the censorship on Foreign Office matters, with certain exceptions, such as, e.g., a telegram going through the country for a foreign country. In his view the policy had justified itself, and it was better to throw the onus on to the press and let them risk prosecution under the Defence of the Realm Act. He would allow the publication of these propagandist messages, for, if withheld now, they would leak out later and the Government would be blamed for suppressing them.

Against this view it was urged that the messages were propaganda from a Government which was not recognised by us or the Allies. A further reason for stopping publication was the Conference now meeting at Paris.

It was reported that complaints had been received from some of the newspapers that they were only allowed to see mutilated copies of some of their telegrams.

The War Cabinet decided that—

For the present the messages above referred to should not be published, and that the Press Bureau should be allowed to show the messages to the newspapers to which they were addressed, at their discretion.
To: The Secretary of State for War.

Subject: Co-ordination of Labour Disputes.

Date: 21st November, 1917.

Dear Sir,

I refer to War Cabinet 276, Minute 3, and Paper W.P. 67, the latter being a record of the proceedings of a Meeting of the Army Council held on the 19th November, 1917, relative to the relations between the Army Council and the British Permanent Military Representative, the War Cabinet directed—

The Secretary to inform the Army Council that the War Cabinet had taken note of the Minute in question of the Army Council and of their desire to co-operate cordially in the development of the work of the Supreme War Council with a view to better co-ordination of effort in the conduct of the war, and that the War Cabinet feels assured that, with this co-operation, the new machinery can be made to work successfully in spite of the difficulties referred to by the Army Council.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]

Co-ordination Committee for Labour Disputes.
tives of the big spending Departments might be appointed not as members of the Committee proper, but as assessors.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The scheme for co-ordination, as set out in Paper G.T.-2772, should be adopted as amended, and expressed the hope that Sir Auckland Geddes would find time to sit as Vice-Chairman of the Co-ordinating Committee.

Further, that the War Cabinet wished it to be understood that representatives of Departments on the Co-ordinating Committee would act in a judicial capacity and not merely as representatives of their administrative Departments.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

November 29, 1917.