WAR CABINET, 297.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, December 13, 1917, at 11 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. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War.


The Right Hon. W. Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.D., M.P., Minister of Reconstruction (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. R. Munro, K.C., M.P., Secretary for Scotland (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. H. E. Duke, K.C., M.P., Chief Secretary for Ireland (for Minute 1 to 16).

Sir A. C. Geddes, K.C.B., M.P., Minister of National Service (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Professor W. G. Adams (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Mr. J. F. Hope, M.P. (for Minutes 1 to 17).


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 19 to 29).

The Right Hon. W. Hayes Fisher, M.P., President, Local Government Board (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. H. A. L. Fisher, LL.D., M.P., President, Board of Education (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. Lord Reonnda, Food Controller (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Mr. U. F. Winton, C.B., C.M.G., Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Food (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Major the Hon. Waldorf Astor, M.P. (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Sir A. Lee, K.C.B., M.P., Director-General, Food Production Department (for Minutes 1 to 18).

The Right Hon. Viscount Goschen, Food Production Department (for Minutes 1 to 18).

Lieutenant-Colonel W. Daily Jones, C.M.G., Acting Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Fleet Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
1. THE War Cabinet resumed the discussion of the Food Situation adjourned from yesterday's Meeting (War Cabinet 296, Minute 13), with special reference to Lord Rhondda's Memorandum (Paper G-180).

The Prime Minister announced that the details of the financial arrangement come to with the American representatives yesterday morning would be settled at a Conference that afternoon.

The War Cabinet decided to request—

The Shipping Controller to give absolute priority to the Food Controller's requirements for tonnage necessary to carry out the programme of food imports.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 283, Minute 12, dealing with the proposed transfer of the organisation for the purchase of meat and cheese from the Board of Trade to the Ministry of Food, the War Cabinet were informed that the attempts to settle the matter had so far been unsuccessful.

Mr. Long said it was important to bear in mind the Dominions' point of view, and suggested that Sir Thomas McKenzie should be consulted.

The War Cabinet decided to ask—

Lord Milner and Mr. Barnes to go into the matter that afternoon, and, if they failed to come to a final decision, to bring up the matter before the Cabinet to-morrow.

3. Lord Rhondda stated that the shortage of tea was an acute cause of popular discontent, which could be remedied by a relatively small expenditure of tonnage, and he would like the Shipping Controller to be authorised to provide tonnage sufficient to raise at once the stock in bond to 60,000,000 lb. after the grocers' stocks had been replenished. Further, the restriction on the importation of Java and China tea should be removed.

Mr. Long said that he understood that twelve liners were being diverted from the East to the Atlantic in order to bring corn to this country.

Lord Derby stated that, under pressure from the Shipping Controller, he had undertaken not to recruit the full number of Chinese coolies. In that way about 100,000 tops of shipping would be saved between Vancouver and China, provided that France also stopped recruiting in China.

The War Cabinet referred the question to Lord Milner and Mr. Barnes for decision that afternoon, in consultation with the Shipping Controller and Food Controller.

4. Lord Rhondda urged that, in the interests of the food supply, it was essential that labour in flour mills and other food factories should be protected from military service. At present only temporary exemptions were granted.

Sir Auckland Geddes said it was difficult to grant absolute protection, but his Department had already negotiated a large measure of protection, and would continue to do everything possible to meet the wishes of the Food Controller. No serious withdrawal of labour was taking place.

5. The War Cabinet instructed—

The Secretary to communicate to all the Departments concerned that in respect of accommodation, printing, and staff the War Cabinet considered that the claims of the Ministry of Food should be treated as being of great urgency.
6. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to the inequality in the distribution of food as between one centre and another. A deputation which had waited on the Prime Minister on the previous day had alleged that in some districts there was an entire lack of butter, lard, margarine, and bacon. It was suggested that greater use ought to be made of the local authorities in the work of distribution, and the administrative experience of Town Clerks and Councillors drawn upon. Further, the Ministry of Food might consider the desirability of making the Co-operative Wholesale Societies and the large private distributing agencies into "controlled establishments" on the analogy of engineering works.

Lord Rhondda stated that at Birmingham and other centres local experiments were being tried with a view to improving distribution and getting rid of queues. He had set up nearly 2,000 local Food Committees, the personnel of which was largely drawn from the local authorities. With regard to local shortages, supplementary allowances had been made to a large number of towns, and steps were being taken to organise distribution schemes for bacon, butter, tea, &c., but they would necessarily take some time to put in motion.

The War Cabinet decided to ask—

The Food Controller to prepare a report on the problem of distribution, with special reference to the points raised in the discussion.

7. The War Cabinet resumed the discussion of the agricultural programme begun at the previous day's meeting (War Cabinet 293, Minute 16), with special reference to Mr. Prothero's Memorandum (Paper G.T.-2767).

Sir Arthur Lee, in the unavoidable absence of the President of the Board of Agriculture, informed the Cabinet that, at a meeting of Agricultural Commissioners, held the previous day, encouraging reports had been received as to the progress made with the agricultural programme. He hoped that at least 80 per cent. of the 2,595,000 acres assigned to breadstuffs would be got ready. This would, roughly, be 2,600,000 acres above the 1916 area. No very reliable estimate could be given of the increased production by small growers, but it was conjectured that there had been an addition of 300,000 tons of potatoes, and 300,000 tons of other vegetables from that source in 1917, and it was hoped to increase this total to 1,000,000 tons in 1918.

Mr. Munro dealt with the position in Scotland, where the aim was to plough by 1918, 350,000 acres above the 1916 area. Of this amount, 50,000 acres had been obtained in 1917. The realisation of the complete programme was contingent on the supply of soldier labour of good quality, of superphosphates, and of an adequate staff at the Board of Agriculture.

Mr. Duke said that in Ireland the output in 1917 above that of 1916 had been 1,750,000 tons of potatoes and 536,000 tons of cereals. The increase in acreage for these crops had been 600,000. In 1918 it was hoped that the increase would be, at least, 1,200,000 acres. There were signs that the Sinn Feiners were turning from active rebellion to a policy of holding up crops, but, so far, this movement had not been serious except in two counties.

8. Sir Arthur Lee said the agricultural programme could only be carried out if the urgent minimum requirements specified in the Memorandum (G.T.-2767) were fully and promptly met. The most urgent need at the moment was for skilled ploughmen, of whom 8,500 in all were required. There were 1,000 in sight from the Army in France, and it was hoped to draw 1,000 from German prisoners now in this country. The Department could place 1,000 skilled ploughmen a week, as the horses and harness required were
now in sight. He understood a second 1,000, withdrawn from the army in France would soon be available.

Mr. Munro said it would not be possible in Scotland to return to the army any of the men lent to the farmers. As to additional labour, 1,000 men next spring would suffice. These should be, if possible, skilled agriculturists, and in any case they should be able-bodied.

Mr. Duke said that there was a constant flow from Ireland of from 500 to 1,000 labourers weekly, attracted by high wages on this side. They were, therefore, very near bedrock in Ireland, and had no skilled ploughmen to spare.

Sir Auckland Geddes said there were perhaps 1,000 skilled ploughmen in the New Zealand Reserves, who could, he understood, be loaned for two and a half months. The New Zealand military authorities were willing to lend them on furlough. In Denmark there were from 3,000 to 5,000 deserters from the German Army now out of work. They were natives of Schleswig-Holstein, and among them were some of the best farmers in Europe. The War Office was raising no objection to their removal, nor was the Foreign Office, subject to the approval of the Danish Government, but it was necessary to arrange tonnage with the Shipping Controller, and to obtain particulars from the Food Production Department as to the farms to which these men could be sent. They would be under the Alien Restriction Act and Orders, and there would be no necessity to provide guards. In Denmark there were between 20,000 and 22,000 unemployed Danes. Probably many of these had had some experience of the land as small-holders; others were butter and margarine makers. He gathered from the Ministry of Labour that there would not be any Trade Union difficulties in connection with their employment in agriculture.

3. Sir Arthur Lee pointed out that it was essential that the War Office and the Prisoners of War Committee should agree to relax the regulations for guarding and accommodating German prisoners, if the maximum advantage was to be obtained from their employment.

General Macready said the War Office was quite prepared to make the necessary relaxations, provided the War Cabinet was prepared to meet the criticism which always arose from the House of Commons and in the press when a prisoner escaped. Up to the present only one officer and two men had got away from the country.

Lord Derby said he was quite willing that the prisoners should go out in twos and threes to farmers, but it was impossible to have tiny camps all over the country. Surveillance could be left to the local police, and weekly reports could be obtained as to the conduct of the prisoners.

Sir Auckland Geddes urged that there should be an industrial census taken of the German prisoners in France and this country similar to that which has been taken in the Home forces, and that, as the ploughmen were discovered, they should be sent in batches to be employed on the land.

Mr. Hope said that as far as the prisoners in the United Kingdom were concerned, instructions to this effect had been given months ago by the Prisoners of War Employment Committee, but they apparently had not been carried out.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The restrictions affecting German prisoners loaned to farmers could be relaxed as far as safely thought possible, the details to be arranged by the Departments concerned.

(b.) A trade index of the German prisoners should be made, and skilled ploughmen released in batches as discovered.
10. Sir Arthur Lee stated that the consumption of sulphate of ammonia for munition purposes was now expected to be greater than previously contemplated, and that there was a prospective deficiency of 40,000 tons in the supplies available for food production. As regards superphosphates, the Cabinet had decided that 50,000 tons per month of phosphate rock should be imported into this country for the five months 1st June to 31st October. Only 149,000 tons have so far been imported instead of 250,000 tons. Sir Arthur Lee pointed out the serious effect of these deficiencies on the future food supplies of the country.

11. Sir Arthur Lee called attention to the prolonged delays which have occurred in the delivery of tractors and other machinery ordered by the Department last spring, and to the importance of providing adequate supplies of fuel and spare parts for all agricultural machinery, whether privately owned or in the hands of the Department. Facilities for the provision of steam tackle and additional equipment were also urgently required.

Mr. Long said that the oil situation had improved within the last week and was now somewhat more secure. He hoped it would be possible to supply all the oil required for agricultural purposes.

The War Cabinet instructed—

The Secretary to call the attention of the Minister of Munitions and the Shipping Controller to the position as described by the Director-General of Food Production, and to the importance of expediting the shipment of machinery from America and of granting the other facilities to manufacturers of steam tackle and equipment now asked for.

12. Sir Arthur Lee stated that his Department was in urgent need of further staff accommodation of about thirty to forty rooms. He did not press for a building in Whitehall, as he knew that the Office of Works had well-nigh exhausted the possibilities in that district.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The First Commissioner of Works should be requested to provide the accommodation referred to as soon as possible, but in his efforts to meet the demands for new accommodation now being made, should inform Departments that they must be prepared, if necessary, to take offices at some distance from Whitehall.

13. The War Cabinet requested—

The Food Controller to make an announcement at the earliest possible moment of the official prices for next year's grain, potatoes, and milk.

14. In response to a request from Sir Arthur Lee to be allowed by the Treasury a reasonable latitude in incurring minor expenditure on the Agricultural Programme, the Chancellor of the Exchequer undertook to consider any representations made to him on the subject.

15. The Chancellor of the Exchequer took note of representations made by Mr. Munro on behalf of the Scottish Board of Agriculture for an increase of staff.
16. Dr. Addison called attention to the insecurity felt over the country by the men who, in order to increase the food supply, had undertaken the cultivation of small patches of ground under the Cultivation of Land Act. It was not necessary to raise at this juncture questions of ownership or saleable interests, but only to safeguard the liberty to cultivate and provide security of tenure during the war.

It was suggested that a public official statement might meet the case.

(No decision was come to.)

17. The War Cabinet had before them the following documents:

- Memorandum by the Food Controller (Paper G.T.-2861).
- Notes on Lord Rhondda's Memorandum by the Chairman of the Committee on the Production and Distribution of Milk (Paper G.T.-2898).
- Note by the Medical Department of the Board of Education (Paper G.T.-2955).

It was pointed out that there were serious objections to the principle of subsidising recommended by the Food Controller, and doubts were thrown on the extent and urgency of the need for cheap milk, in view of the high wages now so widely prevailing.

Mr. Hayes Fisher said he would not object if the scheme were confined to necessitous children, and if suitable machinery was used to discover them.

Major Waldorf Astor said that there was no milk famine at present, but there undoubtedly was bad distribution. His Committee were in favour of any proposal to supply cheap or, if need be, free milk to necessitous children. They believed that this could be done by—

(a.) Empowering the Sanitary Authorities to give, or sell at reduced prices, milk to necessitous children under school age, the necessary grants being made partly out of Exchequer grants and partly out of local rates;

(b.) By the more general feeding of children of school age under the Provision of Meals Act, if and where this was necessary.

Mr. Herbert Fisher said that his Department agreed with Major Astor's report.

The War Cabinet decided—

To accept the recommendations of the Committee on the Production and Distribution of Milk, as set forth above by the Chairman.

18. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by Lord Rhondda (G.T.-2929) in which he expressed his view that not a single pound of oats should be allowed to racing horses, having regard to the very grave shortage of cereals with which the country is threatened.
Lord Rhondda drew attention to the serious effect that allowing a ration of oats to horses engaged in steeplechasing would have upon public opinion in the United States of America.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that it was impossible entirely to prevent racing in England if it were allowed to continue in Ireland, where it could not be stopped. It was also stated that horse-racing is still carried on in Germany.

The War Cabinet authorised—

The Food Controller to issue licences to allow horses engaged in fixtures, agreed by the Board of Trade, to receive a ration of oats; the ration to be 15 lb. a day each for a number of horses not exceeding 500, and the period of the ration not to extend beyond the middle of April.

Shelling of Funchal.

19. The First Sea Lord reported that 2 enemy submarines had shelled Funchal, Madeira, at daybreak on the 12th instant, 3 persons being killed and 17 wounded. Slight damage was done to the town.

Bombing Raid.

20. The First Sea Lord stated that a bombing raid had been carried out on the night of the 11-12th on Bruges Dock, 2½ tons of bombs being dropped. One of our machines is missing.

Submarines

21. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that—

(a.) A motor-launch ran over an enemy submarine, submerged in the vicinity of the Lizard, on the 12th instant. The submarine rose to the surface and the motor-launch attacked her with gunfire, but was unable to use depth charges owing to having carried away her propeller-shaft and rudder.

(b.) Explosions had occurred in the deep mine field in the vicinity of the Folkestone Gate, which indicated the possible loss of an enemy submarine.

Enemy Naval Activity in the North Sea.

22. The First Sea Lord reported that information had been received that, on the 12th instant, enemy destroyers had attacked a Danish steamer off Longstone and a fishing vessel off the Tyne, the destroyers being accompanied by an airship. A report has since been received which indicated that it was possible that the enemy vessels were submarines and not destroyers. The presence of an airship was doubtful.

Attack on a Convoy.

23. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that a convoy of 6 ships, of which 1 was British, 2 Norwegian, 2 Swedish, and 1 Danish, under the escort of the destroyers “Partridge” and “Pellew” and 4 trawlers, had been attacked by 4 enemy destroyers about 34 miles off the coast of Norway at about 1 P.M. on the 12th instant. Full particulars of the action had not yet been received, but it was understood that the “Partridge” had been sunk and that the “Pellew” had reached Norwegian waters, being towed in by a Norwegian torpedo-boat, her engines being out of action. The convoy was stated by the commanding officer of the “Pellew” to have scattered when the attack took place, but no news had yet been received as to whether the convoy had arrived in Norwegian ports, although enquiries were being made to that end. The Admiral at Longhope had reported, however, that the convoy had been destroyed.
The First Sea Lord indicated that there was a British force of two light cruisers and four destroyers 40 miles off when the action took place, also a light cruiser squadron to the southward, but they had been unable to intercept the enemy, who had presumably slipped through during the night.

As regards the protection of convoys in future, Admiral Jellicoe stated that there were two courses open to us: one was to send the convoys on a far northerly course, so that the enemy would not be able to take advantage of the dark hours to evade our patrols, but this would double the length of the voyage; the other was, to run the risk of having battle cruisers, cruisers or light cruisers in close touch with the convoy. If this latter course were adopted the enemy would obtain information of our movements and would undoubtedly concentrate submarines to attack them, and we had not a sufficient number of destroyers available to provide the requisite screen. The question was under consideration. The First Sea Lord indicated the very slight amount of help in the provision of destroyers which we might expect to receive from the United States in the near future.

The War Cabinet discussed the question of mentioning the engagement and possible loss, by the First Lord in the statement on shipping matters which he was to make to the House in the afternoon, and decided that—

As the information at present received was so uncertain, no particulars should be announced pending fuller data being forthcoming.

The Western Front.

24. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that two more German divisions had been transferred from Flanders to the Cambrai region. He added that the fighting at Bullecourt had been severe. Two attacks had been made by the enemy at dawn, after heavy artillery preparation, but both attacks had been beaten off with heavy losses to the enemy, only a small portion of trench being lost by us.

The Invasion of Italy:

25. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had received information from General Plumer to the effect that the Italian commander was satisfied with the results of the recent fighting on the Italian front.

The Italian Command.

26. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had received a telegram from General Foch informing him that the Italians were raising the question of exercising more control over the French force in Italy, and asking whether he was prepared to adopt the principle of complete Italian command over the French and British contingents. General Robertson read to the War Cabinet the original instructions given to General Plumer.

The War Cabinet held the view that, at this stage, it was unnecessary to consider the question, more particularly as General Diaz, who was in command of the Italian troops, was an untried man; but that if the Italians raised the question at a later date, after the abilities of General Diaz had been proved, the matter would be fully considered. They therefore authorised—

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff to inform General Foch that the War Cabinet did not at present propose to make any alteration in the existing instructions.
27. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff asked to be informed of the wishes of the War Cabinet in connection with the preparation of a report which he had been asked to make, relative to an advance in Palestine, based generally on the telegram that was sent to General Allenby in accordance with the Cabinet's directions (War Cabinet 296, Minute 5).

The War Cabinet decided that—

The General Staff should submit for consideration a project for carrying out the following alternative policies:—

(a.) Complete the conquest of the whole of Palestine, and hold the country for the remainder of the war.

(b.) Continue the advance through Palestine and Syria to the vicinity of Aleppo, so as permanently to interrupt railway communication with Mesopotamia.

For the purposes of (a) Palestine to be considered as embracing the whole country between Beersheba and Dan.

28. With reference to War Cabinet 294, Minute 6, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that it had been his intention to send from Egypt to General Plumer two batteries of 6-inch howitzers out of those now in reserve at Alexandria, as he was of opinion that General Allenby had at his disposal at present more howitzers than he had occasion to use.

As the weather on the Western front may be expected in the near future to prevent any large offensive operations in that quarter, and also bearing in mind the difficulty of providing the requisite shipping for the transfer of these batteries from Egypt, and the possible need of sending them back in the event of an extended advance in Palestine, the War Cabinet decided that—

Before the military authorities took any action for the removal of these guns, General Allenby should be asked if he will require the same in the event of his carrying out further operations.

29. In continuation of War Cabinet 296, Minute 12, the War Cabinet had under further consideration the question of the publication of an abridged communication in regard to the Naval Allied Council.

The War Cabinet held the opinion that it was essential that the Naval Allied Military Council should have for their assistance and guidance to their deliberations the services of an experienced naval officer, not necessarily of high rank, with the "sea sense," who was fully acquainted with naval policy and the means by which it was best possible to carry out the same.

The War Cabinet were averse to the creation of a new and independent body to deal with naval matters only, and desired some organisation that would in any case act as a connecting link between the Military and Naval Councils, in view of the need for co-operation that frequently arises between the two services in the many operations of war.

It was mentioned that the Prime Minister had stated in the House of Commons that a British naval representative would be attached to General Wilson, and it was suggested that if we had a representative the French and Italians would also wish to appoint one of their naval officers.

The First Lord stated that the Admiralty had proposed to detail the British Naval Liaison Officer in Paris as Liaison Officer between
the Admiralty and the Inter-Allied Military Council, and that General Wilson had been asked if such a course would be agreeable to him. Sir Eric Geddes added that the Military Council, through the Liaison Officer, would be able to acquire any further information or opinion that they might desire. The First Lord pointed out that, from a naval point of view, the efforts, &c., of the Allies were not comparable to those which prevailed from the military aspect. In the main theatre of naval warfare the Americans and ourselves provided the whole of the Allied force which was working under the British Admiralty, whilst in the Mediterranean the whole of the Allied naval force was under the command of the French Commander-in-Chief. The Allies had arranged that, as a general rule, the meetings of the Allied Naval Council would be held in London—not in France—under the presidency of the First Lord of the Admiralty, the permanent staff being located in London under Admiralty control.

The First Sea Lord stated that he had frequent conversations with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, but that they nearly all related to the provision of escort, and he thought it possible that the Inter-Allied Military Council needed a shipping expert even more than a naval expert, except for certain special operations. The War Cabinet requested—

The First Lord to confer with the First Sea Lord, and to report as to the practicability of appointing a suitable naval officer to the staff of the Inter-Allied Military Council, such officer being also associated with the Allied Naval Council.

The issue of the abridged statement to the press simultaneously with the other parties to the agreement was approved.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
December 13, 1917.