WAR CABINET, 299.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, December 17, 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. G. N. Barnes, 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.


The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.

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


Vice-Admiral Sir R. E. Wemyss, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., Deputy First Sea Lord (for Minutes 9, 10, and 11).


The Right Hon. Sir A. Stanley, M.P., President of the Board of Trade (for Minutes 15 and 16).

The Right Hon. G. H. Roberts, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minutes 15 and 16).

Mr. P. Lloyd Greame, Ministry of National Service (for Minutes 15 and 16).

Captain L. S. Amery, M.P.


Captain the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.
The Western Front: Accident to Leave Train from Italy.

1. THE Director of Military Intelligence reported that a leave train, containing French troops on leave from Italy, had been derailed at St. Michel de Maurienne at midnight on the 12th instant. Traffic had been suspended for forty-eight hours. The question was asked whether this railway accident might be a case of sabotage. The Director of Military Intelligence replied that this was not known, but the French and Italians were taking all necessary precautions to protect the Mont Cenis tunnel by installing electric light and mounting guards, &c. It was not unlikely that the enemy were trying to cut the communications between France and Italy.

The Invasion of Italy.

2. The Director of Military Intelligence reported the receipt of a telegram from General Plumer, dated the 15th December, 1917, to the effect that the enemy's artillery had been very active against the Northern sector. The Italians had been forced to draw back from Col Beretta, which was an important point. The Italian counter-attack had failed, but they proposed making another. The enemy's attacks had been very persistent, but the Italian command were not discouraged. There were now indications of snow.

Moral of Italian Troops.

3. The Director of Military Intelligence said that a telegram had been received from General Plumer, reporting considerable local fighting, with varying success. General Diaz was generally satisfied with the situation, and greatly pleased with the reports as to the state of the moral of the troops which he had had from his army commanders.

Italian Situation: Message to be sent to Italian Prime Minister.

4. With reference to M.P.C. 4 (3), the Director of Military Intelligence read the proposed message to be sent by the Prime Minister to the Italian Ambassador for Signor Orlando, in which it was indicated that German reinforcements were going to France rather than to Italy, and that since the 23rd October only one German division had been actually sent from Russia to the Italian front. The message also added that there were now 65 British battalions in Italy and 54 French.

After some discussion, the War Cabinet—

(a.) Approved the proposed message, but requested the Director of Military Intelligence to insert an additional paragraph on the subject of the artillery position on the Italian front. A copy of the message, as sent, is reproduced in Appendix I.

(b.) In this connection, they also instructed the Secretary to telegraph to General Wilson to find out what the artillery position was on the Italian front.

Palestine.

5. The Director of Military Intelligence said that General Allenby had reported that he had advanced his left centre one and a half miles north-east of Ramleh. Another Turkish division was reported on the 20th November passing south from Damascus en route from the Caucasus. It was therefore possible that General Allenby might meet near Nablus two more divisions, of which one might be German. The number of rifles in a Turkish division amounted to from 4,500 to 5,000. The reason why the Germans had not arrived on the scene earlier, in order to prevent General Allenby capturing Jerusalem, was probably that these particular German divisions had only been formed in Germany during September, and their advanced units did not leave Germany until the 20th October, arriving in Constantinople on the 7th November.
Exploiting recent Success.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 296, Minute 5, the Secretary of State for War reported that he had heard from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who was in France, that General Allenby's reply does not assist very much.

After some discussion as to whether another telegram should be sent to General Allenby on the subject, the War Cabinet decided that—

The matter should wait until the following day, when the Chief of the Imperial General Staff would be back in London.

The Western Front: Extension of British Line.

7. The Secretary of State for War reported the receipt of a telegram from Sir William Robertson, who requested that the Cabinet might give some time on the following day for the discussion of the question of an immediate extension of the British line on the Western front.

The War Cabinet instructed—

The Secretary to arrange accordingly, when drawing up the Agenda for the following day.

Battle of Cambrai: Inquiry.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 292, Minute 8, the Secretary of State for War reported that everything possible was being done by Sir Douglas Haig to expedite the Inquiry in regard to the Battle of Cambrai.

In view, however, of the importance of knowing the result of the Inquiry in time for the House of Commons Debate on Thursday, the 20th instant, the War Cabinet requested—

The Secretary of State for War to telegraph to Sir Douglas Haig asking him for a report on the matter by next Thursday.

Shipping Losses.

9. The Deputy First Sea Lord made the usual statement of Shipping Losses.

Scandinavian Convoy.

10. With reference to War Cabinet 298, Minute 15, the Deputy First Sea Lord reported that a telegram had now been received from the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet in regard to this disaster. It appeared that our two destroyers, the "Partridge" and the "Pellew," were attacked by three enemy destroyers. The "Partridge" was sunk with all hands: the "Pellew" was damaged, but got into Norwegian waters safely. The remaining enemy destroyer proceeded to the rear of the convoy and sunk it. The British ships which were ordered to cover this convoy, although they received an emergency signal from the "Partridge," had arrived too late, and an inquiry was being held in this connection. The German ships appeared to have got back safely. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that a full account of the disaster to the Scandinavian convoy would be included in the First Lord's statement in the House of Commons that afternoon.

China.

11. The Deputy First Sea Lord said that the Commander-in-Chief, China, reported that, owing to long absence of foreign gunboats, the Chinese were less careful of foreigners' lives. At Shasze a British steamer had been fired on and then boarded by troops, who threatened to shoot the master unless the money carried on board was handed over. The master refused, and the ship was finally allowed to proceed. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that it had been decided, in consequence, to send two of the bigger gunboats,
at present up-river in Mesopotamia, to China, having regard to the
fact that the force of gunboats in Mesopotamia was considered to be
larger than was necessary.

12. The Director of Military Intelligence read to the War
Cabinet the information which had been supplied to the press
describing the recent operations in Mesopotamia and Palestine.

The War Cabinet were informed that there had been considerable
publicity given to the fall of Jerusalem, and that the event had
produced a marked effect throughout the world.

13. With reference to Foreign Office telegram No. 765, dated
the 11th December, 1917, from Sir G. Barclay, confirming an identic
Hardinge read a draft reply prepared by the Secretary of State for
Foreign Affairs (Appendix II). Lord Hardinge stated that the
Italian reply had gone further than the reply suggested by
Mr. Balfour.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The telegram as prepared by Mr. Balfour should be sent to
Sir G. Barclay;

and instructed—

Lord Hardinge to communicate its contents to the French
Government that afternoon.

14. The War Cabinet were informed that no confirmation of
the alleged capture of Kaledin by the Bolsheviks had been received.

15. The War Cabinet had before them a draft Report pre-
pared by the Secretary for the Cabinet Committee on Man-power
(Paper M.P.C.-14).

Lord Derby undertook to supply revised and additional estimates
required by the War Cabinet.

The consideration of the Report was adjourned until that
afternoon.

16. The War Cabinet considered whether a full statement on
man-power policy should be made in the House of Commons on
Wednesday or Thursday next, or adjourned until after the Recess.

It was generally agreed to be undesirable to make such a
statement this week, more especially as there would not be time for
negotiations with the trade unions, to whom certain conditional
pledges had been given by Mr. Asquith and Mr. Arthur Henderson.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
December 17, 1917.
APPENDIX I.

Note for the Italian Ambassador.

PLEASE inform the President of the Council that the British War Cabinet is watching the situation in Italy closely. So far they have been unable to obtain any definite information of a further enemy concentration on the Italian front, though such a concentration is not improbable. On the other hand, reports from a variety of sources have been received to the effect that the enemy intends to transfer large bodies of troops to the Franco-British front, and definite and precise information has been obtained that since the 28th October nine German divisions have been moved from the Russian to the Franco-British front, while during the same period definite information has been obtained of the move of only one German division from the Russian to the Italian front. At the present time there are four French and two British divisions in reserve on the Italian front which have not yet been engaged since their arrival in Italy, and the fifth British division is completing its arrival. This brings the number of British battalions in Italy up to sixty-five as against fifty-four French battalions, and the fifth British division is being followed by additional heavy artillery, arrangements for the despatch of which have been completed. In view of the lateness of the season, which makes operations in the mountains increasingly difficult and dangerous to the enemy, and of the fact that, in addition to the large Franco-British reserves, the Italian reserves are being rapidly reconstituted, the War Cabinet trust that the forces now in Italy will suffice to meet any effort which the enemy may make, but as to this they are in constant communication with the Commander of the British Forces in Italy, who has been instructed to report if he considers further reinforcements necessary.

December 16, 1917.

APPENDIX II.

Telegram to Sir G. Barclay (Jassy).

AS stated in my telegram of the 15th, His Majesty's Government are deeply impressed with the courage and loyalty of the Roumanian Government and army, and fully recognise the extreme gravity of their position should a united Russia conclude a separate peace with Germany and Austria. Meanwhile, however, this has not occurred; and though there is apparently little or nothing to be expected of the Russian army for purposes even of organised defence, it does not appear certain that every province is prepared tamely to acquiesce in German domination, if and when the Government at Petrograd should advocate surrender at discretion. His Majesty's Government feel that, deplorable as is the course pursued by the Bolshevik party, it will be worse than useless to attempt to modify it by an appeal to tactics. If the Russians are resolved to fight no more, the pledges of the late Czar will not modify their determination. But this does not relieve us of the duty of supporting the Roumanian army by all the means in our power.

Geographical reasons preclude us from sending men, but we are supplying money not merely to Roumania but to all the regions in Southern and Eastern Russia where there is least hope that the people are prepared either to aid the Roumanian army or to fight for their liberties against the common enemy, whether German or Turkish.

We know of no other or better way of aiding the gallant Roumanian army, nor has any other way been suggested to us. If it fails, and if that army is plainly in immediate peril of complete isolation, we cannot require it to carry on a hopeless struggle. This would complete the ruin of Roumania, and would not help the Allies. In such circumstances there would be nothing left but to destroy the military stores and equipment, and make the best terms possible for the army, the country, and the dynasty. But this tragic consummation can only be contemplated in the last extremity, which even at the worst should not occur until the armistice comes to an end.

In the meanwhile every effort should be made to establish relations with any forces which for local or other reasons are unwilling to acquiesce in a policy of general surrender.

December 16, 1917.

A. J. B.