Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.,
on Wednesday, December 19, 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. A. Bonar Law, 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.
The Right Hon. Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P., Minister of Blockade (for Minutes 6 and 11 to 13).

Fleet-Paymaster P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
Colonel E. D. Swinton, C.B., D.S.O., Assistant Secretary.
Captain C. Jones, Assistant Secretary.

The Western Front: Threatened Attack.

1. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported the receipt of information from various quarters, including Spanish sources, to the effect that heavy attacks on the Western front were threatened by the enemy within the next few weeks, and that great concentrations were being made.

In this connection the Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that, during his recent visit to France, he had made enquiries regarding the situation on the Western front, and had found that it was not so secure as could be desired. The defences on our front were not as good as they should be in order to withstand a heavy and determined attack, and they were not as good as the German defences we have captured. But it had to be remembered that our troops have been engaged on the offensive for the greater part of the year, and therefore have not had much time...
to devote to the construction of defences; and, further, we have been continually pushing our line forward during the year and thus have had new defences to make. This had been especially difficult to do in the devastated area, where, in addition to making new defences, we have had to make roads and railways, and build accommodation for the troops. While we have had to make new defences as we have advanced, the German trenches we have captured were the work of years, and they are able to make new defences beforehand ready for them when they fall back, and they have much civil and prisoner labour to assist them. The French defences also were not in good order, as the Cabinet had heard on the previous day. He had been informed that General Pétain had asked the French War Cabinet last week to give him 200,000 men for work on the defences. The Portuguese, instead of being a help to us, were practically a danger, and we had to keep a division on each of their flanks, as it was felt that they could not be relied upon. It was also doubtful whether the Belgians would stand a heavy attack. Further, the enemy was continually bringing over more artillery, and we may expect that he will bring over a great deal more. Our troops were new, and it remained to be seen to what extent they would stand the bombardment to which they may be subjected. It must also be expected that our too new defences could not be expected to fight as well on the defence as on the offence. They are new, and so are most of the officers, and it had been found necessary, as in the case of all new armies, to give specific instructions beforehand for the action they were to take when fighting. This could be done in offensive operations, and had been done. In the defence, however, it was impossible to give these specific instructions in the same detail, as the enemy set the tune, and it required officers well versed in tactics to know how to meet quickly and properly any new situation which might arise. We had not got such officers at the present time. They were quite different from the officers we had when we were fighting on the defensive in 1914, and General Robertson learned from divisional commanders that they were anxious as to how far our officers would show themselves able to meet a great attack. He had heard the best accounts of the men, but of course they required competent subordinate leaders. Another reason for anxiety in regard to our being on the defensive was that strategically we were in a bad position, as there was very little depth behind our defences, and therefore we had little room to manoeuvre. When Hindenburg got into difficulties as a result of the Somme fighting, he retired part of his line some 20 to 30 miles. We could not do this. Dunkirk was already within range of the enemy's guns, and a short advance by the enemy would bring him within range of Calais and Boulogne. A retirement for even a few miles westward might therefore be disastrous. Retirement in any other direction was impossible. Further, in the area occupied by us there were certain places near to the front line which were of great importance to the French, while the security of the coast bordering on the Straits of Dover was vital to our sea power, upon which the possibility of continuing the war depended. General Robertson stated that it was fully realised by Sir Douglas Haig that we must act on the defence for some time to come, and he had no offensive plans in mind at present. He had therefore given orders for the Armies to go definitely on the defensive, and to take at once all additional defensive measures possible. He would not necessarily fight a decisive battle on his present front line, as there were certain salients and other portions of the line which were tactically quite unsuitable for this. Where this was so he would fight on his front line just sufficient to wear out and break up the enemy's attack as much as possible before the enemy could reach the main defensive position. All the men that could be taken from the roads and other work in the rear were being sent to the front to work on the defences. At the present time there were 22 divisions
2. With reference to War Cabinet 299, Minute 1, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the latest information showed that this accident was more serious than was originally reported. Of 985 men, only 359 were uninjured. It was probable that the accident was a case of sabotage.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported the receipt of a telegram from General Delmé-Radclyffe, received on the 19th December, 1917, to the effect that the enemy had attacked, after heavy bombardment, on the front Ca' d'Anna–Monte Asolone, and succeeded in capturing both objectives. An Italian division had been ordered to make a counter-attack, but the result was not yet known. The serious result was that the only road for wheeled traffic up the Grappa was threatened by the capture of Monte Asolone.

4. With reference to War Cabinet 299, Minute 8, the Secretary of State for War reported that, owing to a fall of snow in France, it had not been possible to obtain all the reports required. A summary, however, had been telegraphed, and Lord Derby undertook to provide the Prime Minister with the necessary material for his statement on the subject in the House of Commons on the following day.

5. The First Sea Lord reported that the Admiralty had requisitioned a Russian icebreaker built in this country. It was proposed to send this icebreaker to the White Sea, to be used there in case the Russians fail to give us the necessary assistance.

6. The War Cabinet had under consideration the position of Norway, as set out in paper G–184, and adopted the recommendations contained therein, and requested—

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to take the necessary diplomatic action as regards the United States Government and the British Ministers in Stockholm and Christiania.
The Supreme War Council.

7. The War Cabinet had before them a joint note to the Supreme War Council, submitted by its Permanent Military Advisers (Paper W.P. 69) (Appendix I).

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff expressed general concurrence in the Report, which was assented to by the War Cabinet.

The Transport Problem.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 291, Minute 2, and to paragraph 1(e) of the joint note referred to in the previous Minute, there was some discussion as to the question of the appointment of an officer to examine and report upon the whole of the transport arrangements of the Allies as approved at the Meeting of the Supreme War Council held at Versailles, on Saturday, the 1st December, 1917.

It was generally agreed that, as Sir Eric Geddes could not be spared, General Nash would be the best possible selection for the post.

The War Cabinet decided that—

This should be pressed by the Prime Minister at the next meeting of the Supreme War Council.

The Western Front: Extension of the British Line.

9. With reference to War Cabinet 301, Minute 8, the War Cabinet decided that—

During the discussions by the Permanent Military Adviser to the Supreme War Council on the subject of the extension of the British line, it was desirable that a representative of the Field-Marshall Commanding-in-chief, British Expeditionary Force, should be in attendance at Versailles to answer any points raised by the French General Staff.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff undertook to initiate the necessary action.

Air Raid.

10. The Secretary informed the War Cabinet that the Field-Marshall Commanding the Home Forces had nothing to add to the communique which had been circulated to the members of the War Cabinet. The Secretary added that he had received information from the Secretary of State for Home Affairs that the whole of the police reports had not yet been received, but that it appeared that the casualties in London were approximately 8 killed and between 60 and 70 injured, and that two large fires had broken out as well as several smaller conflagrations. In addition to bombs being dropped in London, bombs had been dropped at Margate, and also in other parts of Kent, and in Essex.

The First Sea Lord reported that one of the Gothas that took part in the raid had been towed into Folkestone, but had sunk as the result of an explosion. Two of the crew were captured.

Russia.

11. The Prime Minister reported a conversation he had had with a Mr. Thompson—an American traveller and a man of considerable means—who had just returned from Russia, and who had given a somewhat different impression of affairs in that country from what was generally believed. The gist of his remarks was that the Revolution had come to stay; that the Allies had not shown themselves sufficiently sympathetic with the Revolution; and that MM. Trotzki and Lenin were not in German pay, the latter being a fairly distinguished Professor. Mr. Thompson had added that he considered the Allies should conduct in Russia an active propaganda, carried out by some form of Allied Council composed of men especially
selected for the purpose; further, that, on the whole, he considered, having regard to the character of the de facto Russian Government, the several Allied Governments were not suitably represented in Petrograd. In Mr. Thompson's opinion, it was necessary for the Allies to realise that the Russian army and people were out of the war, and that the Allies would have to choose between Russia as a friendly or a hostile neutral.

The question was discussed as to whether the Allies ought not to change their policy in regard to the de facto Russian Government, the Bolsheviks being stated by Mr. Thompson to be anti-German.

In this connection Lord Robert Cecil drew attention to the conditions of the armistice between the German and Russian armies, which provided, inter alia, for trading between the two countries, and for the establishment of a Purchasing Commission in Odessa, the whole arrangement being obviously dictated by the Germans. Lord Robert Cecil expressed the view that the Germans would endeavour to continue the armistice until the Russian army had melted away.

Sir Edward Carson read a communication, signed by M. Trotzki, which had been sent to him by a British subject, the manager of the Russian branch of the Vauxhall Motor Company, who had just returned from Russia (Paper G.T.-3040) (Appendix II). This report indicated that M. Trotzki's policy was, ostensibly at any rate, one of hostility to the organisation of civilised society rather than pro-German. On the other hand, it was suggested that an assumed attitude of this kind was by no means inconsistent with Trotzki's being a German agent, whose object was to ruin Russia in order that Germany might do what she desired in that country.

Lord Robert Cecil suggested that the best plan was to continue the present policy of rallying to the Allies, and assisting all those elements in South Russia that were resisting the Bolsheviks, and stated that he had received information from Jewish sources that the Ukranians were prepared to oppose the existing Russian Government.

It was stated that M. Huysmans had confirmed this statement, and had urged the sending of, say, 100 Socialists to South Russia to act on our behalf.

Lord Robert Cecil suggested that, in order to render our policy more effective, we should place funds at the disposal of Sir Charles Marling, our Minister in Teheran, and give him a free hand to do the best he can by agents, propaganda, and any other means, to keep the people of South Russia on our side. Lord Robert Cecil mentioned that the Jews were very powerful in the Ukraine, and it might be possible to obtain their support.

Against this was urged the impossibility of influencing Southern Russia from such a distant place as Teheran, and also the difficulty of obtaining suitable persons who were conversant with the Russian language. It was further suggested that if the Bolsheviks should gain the upper hand and eventually achieve complete success, the evidence of the support we had given to their opponents would intensify their irritation and throw them even more into the hands of the Germans than they are now.

12. Mr. Barnes informed the War Cabinet that Mr. Henderson had called on him yesterday, and had stated that he had received a telegram from M. Huysmans asking Mr. Henderson to press for an International Conference at Stockholm, to counteract malign influences. The latter had asked Mr. Barnes whether it was probable that the Government would grant the necessary passports for such a conference at Stockholm, and, on Mr. Barnes replying in the negative, Mr. Henderson had stated that he would not press the matter for Stockholm, but would suggest some alternative place for the meeting.
13. The Prime Minister read to the War Cabinet a letter he had received from Mr. Henderson, forwarding a resolution from the Parliamentary Committee of the Labour Party, desiring that the Government should make a declaration as to the war aims of the Allies for the consideration of the Labour Party Conference that will meet on 25th December next.

Mr. Barnes stated that Mr. Henderson was anxious to consult with the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on the subject.

The Prime Minister indicated his willingness that Mr. Henderson should see Mr. Balfour in this connection.

The War Cabinet proceeded to have a short discussion as to any announcement of the war aims of the Allies, and it was pointed out that the question of the Balkans was probably the most difficult to set out.

It was stated that it might be assumed that Russia no longer made any claim to Constantinople, but that it was imperative—if any statement was made that dealt with Turkey—that it must be made quite clear that that Power would not be allowed to exercise any control of the waterway between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
December 19, 1917.
Joint Note to the Supreme War Council submitted by its Permanent Military Representatives.

Military Policy.

To the Supreme War Council

THE Permanent Military Representatives having, in accordance with the instructions contained in M. Clemenceau's address to the Supreme War Council on the 1st December and in the resolutions subsequently passed by the Supreme War Council, reviewed the general military situation by the light of the information furnished by the General Staffs of their respective Governments, and, taking into consideration the possible consequences of the armistice on the Russian front, the present position with regard to man-power in the Allied countries and the necessity imposed of finding men for the production of munitions, the replacement of tonnage, and the increase of domestic food production, &c., are of opinion that the policy outlined below should be adopted by the Allied Governments and put into execution by their General Staffs without delay:

1. A definite and co-ordinated system of defence from the North Sea to the Adriatic must be adopted by the Allies. This will include:

(a.) The reconsideration of existing lines of defence and the construction of further and successive defensive lines to check an advance by the enemy.

(b.) The use to the utmost of all possible mechanical means in order—

(i.) To provide the maximum mobile reserve.

(ii.) To afford rest and opportunities of training for reserves.

(c.) The greatest possible development of rail and sea communications between the different sections of the front and the preparations to be made for the movement of troops between these different sections, especially in respect of the Italian front, and of the measures to be taken in the case of a German attack through Switzerland.

The defensive policy thus advocated need not preclude such minor forms of active defence as any Commander-in-Chief may think necessary for maintaining the offensive spirit of his troops.

Furthermore, the policy of a strong defensive not only does not preclude, but actually prepares for, any offensive measures in any theatre of war as may be decided upon for 1918, when the present political situation in Russia and the military situation in Italy are more clearly defined.

2. A similar policy of definite defence must be adopted in the Balkans. In the event of serious attack by the enemy in this theatre of war, in which it might be impossible adequately to reinforce the troops now available, it is necessary to envisage the possibility of a systematic and pre-arranged retirement from part, at any rate, of the existing front. The character and direction of such a retirement is so intimately connected with considerations arising out of Balkan politics and the submarine warfare that it will form the subject of a separate paper.

3. With regard to the Turkish theatre of war (Palestine, Mesopotamia, Armenia), the Permanent Military Representatives are not yet in a position to make any recommendations as to the possibility of further developing and exploiting the successes recently gained by the Allied forces.

4. The co-ordinated development to the utmost of the manufacture of all war material is of paramount importance, as is also the use of this war material so as to obtain the best results from existing formations. This proposal may involve changes in the organisation of certain existing armies.
3. In view of the prospect of a greatly increased supply of aeroplanes of constantly increasing power and range in the course of 1918, the Permanent Military Representatives wish to draw attention to the necessity for a careful study of the possibilities of a co-ordinated air offensive on the largest possible scale.

6. The above are the principles which should be adopted forthwith, and the Permanent Military Representatives will submit reports in detail on these subjects at a later date.

(Signed) WEYGAND, (Signed) HENRY WILSON, (Signed) L. CADORNA.
Generals.
French Section, Supreme War Council, British Section, Supreme War Council, Italian Section, Supreme War Council.

Versailles, December 13, 1917.

APPENDIX II.

THE power of the Soviet is the power of the workers and peasants and soldiers; and remember that the soldiers are simply the self-same workers and peasants. This is the first really large scale trial of Government by the labouring masses. Till now the Government of a country was simply an instrument of power wielded by a small section which possessed everything over a large part which possessed nothing. Our plan is to form a Government based on the power of the larger mass of the people, which larger mass is now freeing itself from the oppression of the small mass. Government by the small mass has so far generally caused poverty and misery to the larger mass. The Soviet is the main organ of this new power in the centre and provinces of Russia.

Our programme is dictated by the interests of workers and peasants. Peace is essential to them. The power of our Soviet is an instrument for fighting for peace. In this fight for peace we are not reckoning on the good-will of the bourgeoisie and its diplomacy, but on the pressure of the people. No official or semi-official patriotic lie can screen the fact that the labouring masses in all the warring countries are revolutionised to the very depths by this disgraceful slaughter, which does no more than show up the criminal character of capitalistic rule. The masses in all the countries hate the war and who caused the war.

Revolution broke out first in Russia only for the reason that the machinery of government was weaker in Russia than in other countries. But the war has in all countries caused an accumulation of revolutionary yearnings in the very depths of mankind, and revolution will break out earlier than is expected by the ruling parties of Europe. The plan of our universal policy is to give a push to the revolution in the centre and on the west of Europe. This is the real road to a democratic peace.

What about Belgium? Alsace-Lorraine? We did not at the commencement of the war believe, and do not believe now, that the war is carried on by the ruling class for the sake of guarding the rights of weak nations. No! the bourgeoisie of all countries are fighting for property. If it could be imagined that the war will pass without punishment to the ruling classes, and that imperialism will remain the guiding hand in politics of so-called civilised people, it would be naive to think of the defending of weak and backward nations. Imperialism took everything and made slaves of everybody. Only the undefeated revolution of the working classes against imperialism can free Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, and all weaker countries.

We are convinced that the German peoples, who are now shedding their own blood, will not allow the German ruling-class officers to attack revolutionary Russia. We are sure there will be a temporary peace on all fronts. But if (though we find it impossible to imagine this) against our straight and open proposition of immediate democratic peace, the German people remain passive and the German Kaiser moves his armies against us, our army will defend itself to the last drop of blood, because it is not now a question of an imperialistic war, but it is the question of guarding the revolution, which offers peace to everybody.

We have given over the land of Russia from the landowner to the peasant, and the peasant will not pay anything for it.
We are placing a workers' control over production, with the object of gradually changing over the basis of production from capitalistic on to socialistic lines.

We are nationalising all banks, with the object of making one national bank. In these matters we shall act fearlessly and without pity, overcoming the resistance of landowners and capitalists who do not wish to give up their privileges without a fight.

Our plans are colossal, difficult, grandiose, but the strength of the people, opened up by the revolution, will overcome all difficulties and fulfil its ideals.

(Signed) L. TROTSKY.

Smolny Institute, November 3 (o.s.), 1917.
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French Section, Supreme War Council,
British Section, Supreme War Council,
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13.12.17.

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