WAR CABINET, 376.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, March 28, 1918, 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, O.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. Sir A. C. Geddes, K.C.B., M.P., Minister of National Service (for Minutes 5 to 7).

Rear-Admiral G. P. W. Hope, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord.

The Right Hon. H. E. Duke, K.C., M.P., Chief Secretary for Ireland (for Minutes 5 to 7).

The Right Hon. Sir James Campbell, Bart., M.P., Lord Chief Justice of Ireland.

The Right Hon. Sir Edward Carson, K.C., M.P. (for Minutes 1 to 5).

Professor W. G. S. Adams (for Minutes 5 to 7).


Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Paymaster-in-Chief P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.

The Western Front.

German Attack. The Present Position.

I. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that both north and south of the Somme heavy fighting had taken place on the 27th instant. The enemy in certain directions had made some progress, but vigorous counter-attacks by British, Australian, and New Zealand divisions are reported to have greatly restored the situation. South of the Somme our troops and the French were also heavily attacked, but had maintained their position except for the capture of Montdidier by the Germans. The
capture of this place affected the detraining of the French reserves, which was now being carried out at a point as close as possible to Montdidier as well as at St. Just, where a parallel line exists at a distance of 10 miles from Montdidier. The French General Headquarters had stated that they were satisfied as regards the situation in the vicinity of Montdidier.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff explained the plan on which General Fayolle was operating. Field-Marshal Lord French and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff both considered that the situation had not deteriorated. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that seventy-eight German divisions had been identified on the battle front, four more had probably arrived yesterday, and the Germans had twenty-two fresh divisions in reserve. He mentioned that four United States divisions were replacing four French divisions, with a view to the latter being utilised, if necessary, on the battle front. He further stated that the War Cabinet, in taking into consideration the situation, must bear in mind that in the near future, when the Germans get their heavy guns up, the very important railway junction at Amiens will be under fire, which will be extremely serious.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff further stated that the enemy was to-day making an attack east of Arras. Sir Douglas Haig, however, anticipated this attack, and had divisions in reserve behind the line.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that a telegram had been received from the General Officer Commanding in Mesopotamia to the effect that our operations on the Euphrates had been completely successful. On the evening of the 26th March the enemy's position north of Khan Baghlaedi was carried by assault, and our cavalry, by means of a wide movement, had established itself in the rear of the Turks astride the Aleppo road. The attempt of the enemy to break through the cavalry failed, without heavy losses, and practically the whole of the Turkish force on the right bank of the Euphrates below Haditha was captured and destroyed. The pursuit of the fugitives is in progress, and up to the present prisoners are estimated at 3,000, including 200 officers, 2,000 rifles, 10 guns, many machine guns, 900 animals, and other booty spread over a wide region were also taken. Our casualties are very slight.

3. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that H.M.S. "Kale," "Exe," and "Waveney" had passed into one of our minefields, and that H.M.S. "Kale" had sunk and H.M.S. "Exe" had been damaged, one officer and forty-two men being lost from the former and three officers and two men from the latter. The vessels were off their authorised course and in a prohibited area. A Court of Enquiry is being held.

4. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that bombing raids had been carried out from Dunkirk on the night of the 26th March on the railway communications in the rear of the enemy battle-front, a total of over 6 tons of bombs being dropped. He added that a raid was also carried out on Ostend seaplane base.

5. With reference to War Cabinet 375, Minute 2, the Prime Minister informed the War Cabinet that, with a view to obtaining additional evidence as to the feeling that might be expected in Ireland in regard to conscription and its effects on the Convention, he had asked Sir Edward Carson and Sir James Campbell, the
Lord Chief Justice of Ireland, to attend the meeting for the purpose of giving the War Cabinet the benefit of their opinions on these matters.

Sir James Campbell said that he had been considering the matter anxiously, and some two years ago there had been three opportunities when, in his opinion, conscription could have been put in force in Ireland without serious trouble arising, but that advantage had not been taken of them at the time. The most favourable of these three had been after the rebellion. Since then the position had vitally changed. During the past two years a new class had grown up, and the late backbone of the Irish disaffection, namely, farmers and their sons, had given place to a body composed of shop assistants, clerks, Government officials, school teachers, &c., who were more or less educated and had ideas of their own, and also had the characteristic of being devoid of fear. It was also to be borne in mind that emigration during the past four years from Ireland had been stopped, and that whereas before the war the rate of emigration was 30,000 a year, it had only been 40,000 in the past four years, which left a balance of those who would have emigrated, if they could, of 50,000. Of this latter figure, 50,000 might be taken as representing young men of military age who had not the slightest intention of fighting. As regards the educated and semi-educated class referred to above, it must be understood that it was not bluff on their part when they defied the Magistrates before whom they were brought; they did not even take the trouble to defend themselves, as in the past, and claimed that they were haled before a British Court to which they owed no allegiance.

Sir James Campbell was convinced that conscription could only now be enforced in Ireland at the cost of tremendous bloodshed. National military service, if applied to Ireland at all, must be of universal application, and no system of exemptions by tribunal was practicable. Further, it must be borne in mind that, if conscription was introduced, practically the whole of the clergy, from the Archbishops downwards, would take the field against the British Government, and the whole of the Nationalist officials and all public bodies would also go against the Government, as well as certain sections in Ulster, inasmuch as the agricultural population of Ulster objected to conscription, and as regards voluntary recruiting, had done little better than the other parts of Ireland. If it was a question of only taking men who could be depended upon, the numbers gained by the introduction of conscription would, in his opinion, be very small. Questioned as to why the situation should have changed so much as regards conscription since the rebellion, Sir James Campbell stated that, after the rebellion, the people generally were gravely concerned at the failure of the same and the penalties to which they consequently rendered themselves liable; and if conscription had then been introduced, the tendency would have been to look upon it as an act of clemency in lieu of punishment authorised by law, and further the number of Sinn Feiners at that date was small compared with the present.

A suggestion was made that Sir James Campbell should get into touch with a few of the leading men in Ireland whose views might be of help, and discuss the matter of conscription with them; but this course was considered undesirable, as it might lead to the break-up of the Convention.

Sir Edward Carson stated that he did not profess to know the situation as regards the South and West of Ireland, and he did not feel that he could go against the views expressed by Sir James Campbell, whose whole heart was in the war, and who had formerly strongly favoured compulsory service for Ireland. He thought that it would be desirable, as a first step, to get the Bill, which would result in much opposition in the House of Commons, but could be passed by closure. That, however, would cause tremendous opposition in Ireland, and the Nationalists would probably endeavour to get back under their banner the other Irish parties. He was of opinion that, with the strong opposition of the Sinn Feiners, the
number of reliable men that could be got would be very small, as at least two-thirds to be obtained would be anti-British. He was therefore forced to the conclusion, with much regret, that the result of conscription in Ireland would be such that its introduction was not worth contemplating, in view of the disturbances that would be caused. He felt that if conscription was made applicable only to Ulster, which would tend to create the feeling that one party was being bled at the expense of another, there would be trouble amongst the farmers of that county. While expressing views in the above sense on the question as viewed from a purely Irish standpoint, Sir Edward Carson, when asked by Lord Curzon to give his opinion from an Imperial point of view, agreed that if the British Government found themselves unable to get men from Great Britain without enforcing conscription in Ireland, the question became a very different one.

In view of the effect which conscription would have on the Convention, Mr. Duke suggested that the two matters might be treated separately, namely, that the Convention was one matter and part of our permanent policy and should be kept in the forefront, and, secondly, conscription under entire military control should be treated as a secondary matter, dependent on the acceptance of the Convention. He stated that he was under the impression that a Defence Committee, appointed by the Convention, was rendering a separate Report as regards military control in Ireland, and that the Imperial Parliament was held to be responsible. Mr. Duke mentioned that, as far as his experience of Ireland went, it was not impossible to carry out in that country measures which were demonstrably just.

[At this point Sir Edward Carson left the meeting.]

In the general discussion that followed, it was mentioned—

(a.) That since the rebellion the number of Sinn Féiners had multiplied by at least twenty or thirty.

(b.) That the question of conscription had now become an Imperial one, and that we could only maintain our position in the war by further sacrifices and effort.

(c.) That directly conscription for Ireland was broached as being probable, the Convention would break up, and we should have the whole of Ireland against us.

(d.) That the Irish, even if conscripted, would not fight, and would be a weakness instead of a strength, and that it was possible they might even shoot their officers. In this connection, however, the military authorities present held the view that, if Irishmen were once conscripted, spread over the whole of the British Army, and subjected to discipline, the likelihood of their failing to fight well was remote.

(e.) That, in deciding as to conscription or otherwise, and its effects on the Convention, our position as regards the United States and the Dominions must be carefully borne in mind.

(f.) If further conscription was forced on Great Britain and conscription not applied to Ireland, the British public would not submit to the passing of legislation based on the Report of the Convention.

(g.) That the Report of the Convention might be accepted by Parliament, subject to conscription being enforced as regards Ireland.

(h.) That the Government are pledged to Home Rule in the terms of the Prime Minister’s letter to the Convention, and that, if there was a substantial measure of agreement with such letter on the part of the Convention, the logical order would be first to pass Home Rule, so removing a
wrong, or an imaginary wrong, to the people of Ireland, and then to bring in conscription.

(i.) That provision might be made in the Bill for the Government to take power by Order in Council to extend conscription to Ireland, and not to put such power into operation until the Report of the Convention had been accepted by the Government.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 375, Minute 3, Sir Auckland Geddes stated that his proposal to raise 450,000 men in England could not be carried out without tremendous industrial disturbance, and it was mentioned, in connection with taking a quota of men away from agriculture, that, as compared with 1916, some 4,000,000 additional acres of land had been ploughed in the United Kingdom, and that any withdrawal in that direction in the near future would be disastrous to our agricultural policy. Sir Auckland Geddes continued that to obtain these numbers it would be essential to do away with Tribunals. He pointed out that in next May or June there would be a big gap as regards drafts for the Army. At the present moment he was putting on every possible pressure, and the number of recruits was improving, but that every day lost in bringing forward a Bill for extending compulsory military service meant a further gap as regards the intake of men for drafts. He added that, as far as he had gathered when touring the country, the British public would not accept an extension of the age to 50 with no Tribunals unless conscription was applied to Ireland. He stated that, as regards his numbers, he had made allowance for an increase in the numbers employed in shipyards. There was no real reservoir of fighting men in the luxury trades now, and to obtain the men required, if the mines were to be maintained, important trades other than direct war trades would have to be very seriously curtailed.

As regards the question of introducing to Parliament any extension of the Military Service Act, a view was expressed that it was desirable to defer the introduction of any Bill until the Report of the Convention had been received. It was stated that its receipt might be expected on or about the 4th April, and that therefore it would be desirable to defer the meeting of Parliament from the 2nd until the 9th April. As against any delay, it was urged that the feeling in the country at the present moment was such that any measures introduced forthwith into Parliament with a view to strengthening our armed forces in the field would have much better prospects of being passed speedily through both Houses than if there were delay, and the situation had cleared somewhat.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported, however, that it was improbable that the situation would have finally cleared by 9th April. He urged with the utmost emphasis, and asked that it might be placed on record, that from a military point of view every single day of delay in introducing new measures for additional men was dangerous, and that each day now was of value. He added, with equal emphasis, that this crisis was only the first of several, and possibly not even the most deadly.

The Secretary of State for War and Field-Marshal Lord French supported General Wilson's views on the military importance of early action.

The War Cabinet, after deliberating amongst themselves, decided that—

Parliament should not be summoned to meet next Tuesday, 2nd April, 1918. (See also War Cabinet 376 A, where Lord Milner's dissent from this conclusion is recorded.)
Proposed Lowering of Age Limit.

7. The general view was expressed that the feeling of this country was such that to lower the age of recruiting to 17 was impracticable.

S. With reference to War Cabinet 374, Minute 8, the Prime Minister read a telegram, which had arrived during the meeting, from Mr. Baker, in which he recorded that the following action was being taken by General Pershing:

(a.) The four American divisions were being put immediately into the trenches in order to relieve French divisions.

(b.) Three regiments of engineer troops were being sent to assist Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, and further divisions would be sent as soon as transportation was available.

(c.) In the case of American divisions under orders to leave the United States of America, the infantry would be sent first.

The War Cabinet expressed gratification at the prompt action taken by Mr. Baker and General Pershing.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

March 28, 1918.