Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, April 17, 1918, at 11.30 A.M.

Present:
The Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.
The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

The following were also present:
The Right Hon. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 20).
The Right Hon. the Earl of Derby, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War.
Major-General Sir F. B. Maurice, K.C.M.G., C.B., Director of Military Operations (for Minutes 1 to 20).
Major-General Sir G. M. W. Macdonogh, K.C.M.G., C.B., Director of Military Intelligence (for Minutes 1 to 20).

Brigadier-General P. P. de B. Radcliffe, C.B., D.S.O., War Office (for Minutes 1 to 20).
Admiral Sir R. E. Wemyss, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 1 to 20).
The Right Hon. Sir Joseph Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minute 22).
Mr. U. F. Wintour, C.B., C.M.G., Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Food (for Minute 22).
Sir E. Wyldboire Smith, Commission internationale de Ravitaillement (for Minute 22).

Paymaster-in-Chief P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.
The Western Front.

1. THE Director of Military Operations reported that the latest news, which he had just received by telephone, was better. A French division, in co-operation with Australians, had carried out a successful counter-attack from Meteren, and had driven the enemy half way to Bailleul. It was understood that Wytschaete had been recaptured, although the situation there was not quite clear. With regard to French assistance, the Director of Military Operations said that Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Herbert Plumer were both of opinion that, in order to make our position safe in that area, it would be necessary to obtain the assistance of four French divisions. Of these three divisions had already been allocated to assist our troops, and the question of the fourth was under consideration. The Director of Military Operations said that General Foch had no doubt that Kemmel and the ground in front must be held. He had thought, however, that General Plumer could hold the position with the troops which he already had. That was the point at which there was difference of opinion, but it seemed that General Foch was now coming round to the view that it was necessary to send French reinforcements.

With regard to the general situation, General Foch viewed the battle-front as one whole; he regarded our army as bearing the brunt to good purpose, namely, in order to keep the Allied reserves, which he did not wish to fritter away, intact. General Foch’s object was to stabilise the battle with the least expenditure of reserves, although, of course, a point might come when the strain on our troops would be so great that it could not be withstood, and then there could be no stabilisation.

Casualties.

2. The Director of Military Operations reported that he had heard from the Adjutant-General in France that our casualties from 21st March to 15th April, inclusive, amounted to 221,000, of all ranks.

German Casualties.

3. With reference to War Cabinet 391, Minute 5, the Director of Military Intelligence said that, while he was very loth to give a figure, he believed that the German losses were in excess of ours. They might even be over 300,000. Before the fighting, the Germans had 400,000 men in depots, in addition to another 100,000 men obtainable from Russia. The Director of Military Intelligence thought it improbable that, if 100,000 men came from Russia in the form of drafts, as many as twenty additional organised divisions could also be brought.

Withdrawal from Passchendaele.

4. The Director of Military Operations reported the withdrawal of our troops from Passchendaele, according to plans previously arranged. The withdrawal had begun on Sunday night, 14th April, and had been completed on Monday night, 15th April. It appeared that the Germans had not at first been aware of the withdrawal, for they had bombarded the position after we had vacated it, and we had replied by counter-fire, to preserve the camouflage. It was stated that we were still holding the Pilken Ridge, and had, therefore, not given up the whole of the gains secured in that neighbourhood last autumn.

Co-operation of the United States of America.

5. With reference to War Cabinet 300, Minute 8, the Prime Minister reported that the Shipping Controller had informed him that during this month British ships would probably bring over from 60,000 to 70,000 American troops. He estimated that during May 100,000 men would be conveyed in British ships, and during June 200,000.
In reply to a question as to whether the Americans could provide the men to fill the tonnage allocated, Lord Derby said that the American infantry awaiting shipment amounted to about 450,000.

6. The Secretary of State for War reported that a proposal had been made that the cadre of British divisions which had suffered in the battle should be brought back to England, and that American reinforcements should be mixed in with them, and, after training, sent back to France.

The Director of Military Operations said that another suggestion had been to send to Italy the divisions that had been shattered, after they had been brought up to strength by the incorporation of United States troops, at the same time replacing them in France by our divisions from Italy.

The War Cabinet decided that—

This question should be raised again after the return of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

7. Attention was drawn to the fact that a Member of Parliament, a King's Messenger, had been spreading gossip of a depressing character in the Lobby of the House of Commons, in regard to the conditions in France.

The Secretary of State for War was asked to see the officer concerned.

8. The Director of Military Intelligence said that he had received a request from General Headquarters, France, that no mention should be made of French troops in Flanders. At the same time it was pointed out that the enemy, from their recent experience at Wytschaete and Meteren, must know that French troops were operating in that neighbourhood.

9. With reference to War Cabinet 392, Minute 2, the Director of Military Intelligence said that the enemy had moved two more divisions north of La Bassée Canal; both of these had come from Alsace. There were now 28 divisions north of La Bassée, and 96 on the Somme, making a total of 126. There were 22 fresh German divisions on the whole of the Western battle-front. As to a roulement, after deducting Landwehr, and troops of little value, there were 34 fresh divisions, making a total 56 available for further operations.

The Director of Military Operations undertook to give the Prime Minister our figure of fresh troops available for further operations, which compared with the above-mentioned figure of 56 German divisions.

10. The Director of Military Intelligence reported that there were 132 German divisions at the front, of which 72 were in the actual battle line. They also had 51 tired divisions re-fitting behind the line.

11. The Director of Military Operations reported that General Foch remained confident. General Foch had asked him to convey a
message, that if he had to choose between playing his own hand or that of Ludendorff, if he had to get to Berlin he would prefer Ludendorff's hand, but as his mission was to check Ludendorff he preferred his own.

12. The Director of Military Intelligence reported that German divisions were still coming from Russia. One more dismounted cavalry division had been identified, holding part of the line in the Vosges, making four in all. One more infantry division had arrived on the Western front, making a total of 905 in all.

The Director of Military Intelligence undertook to give the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs the total number of German divisions that had been moved from Russia to the Western front since the Brest-Litovsk Conference. He estimated that the figure was at least fifty.

13. The Director of Military Intelligence reported that there might possibly be 100 Austro-Hungarian batteries, or, say, 350 guns, on the Western front. The feeling appeared to be growing in Austria, in view of the success of the Germans, that Austro-Hungarian troops might now with advantage be employed on the Western front. There was a block of eight divisions in West Austria, to the east of the Bavarian frontier, which might possibly be so employed. These eight divisions had been part of the force in Galicia and on the Roumanian frontier. They were all good divisions. One of them was half German, another a mixture of Magyars and Germans, another was Polish with some Czechs in it, and two others were half Polish.

14. The Director of Military Operations reported that General Allenby was in touch with Faisal, and that successful attacks had been made on the Hedjaz Railway north and south of Meam, and, further south, nearer Medina, inflicting losses on the enemy. North of Medina 7 miles of railway had been torn up.

15. The Director of Military Operations reported a small check in East Africa. General Northey's force had engaged a strong enemy force 25 miles south-west of Nanungu on the 11th April. Unexpected strength was shown by the enemy, and we had been pressed back by superior numbers to Mahua on the 12th April. The affair, however, was not of great importance.

16. With reference to War Cabinet 392, Minute 4, the First Sea Lord reported that our ships had returned from their sweep into the Cattegat, that they had sustained no casualties, and had sunk twelve enemy trawlers.

17. With reference to War Cabinet 390, Minute 17, the War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum (Paper A.T.-4246) by the First Sea Lord, as to the situation at Murmansk and Finnish intentions with regard to the acquisition of the Murman coast.

Sir Eric Geddes expressed the view that the Senior Naval Officer at Murmansk should be given information as to the line of policy of the Allies with regard to Murmansk, so as to be guided accordingly in any action he might be called upon to take, and he recommended that he should be authorised to give the assurances specified in his telegram No. 264 of the 15th instant.

Mr. Balfour concurred.
The First Lord stated that, until the thaw had finished, it was not anticipated that any military operations other than guerilla warfare would be possible in the vicinity of the Kola Inlet, and advocated the sending of an expert military officer to Murmansk to report, in conjunction with the Senior Naval Officer, on the situation in the event of it being possible to send at a later date a military force to co-operate with the Allied naval forces at present there.

Reference was made to a recent telegram (No. 91 of the 12th April) from Mr. Lockhart, which indicated that M. Trotzki was now in favour of our co-operation.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in consultation with the First Lord, should send a telegram to Mr. Lockhart agreeing on broad lines to the requests of the Senior Naval Officer at Murmansk, similar instructions being sent to the latter by the Admiralty;

(b.) The Secretary of State for War should send a suitable military officer to Murmansk at the first opportunity for the purpose of rendering a report on the situation generally, and with special reference to the possibility of holding the Kola Inlet and the force necessary for the purpose, such report being rendered in due course to the War Cabinet.

18. With reference to War Cabinet 390, Minute 18, the First Lord informed the War Cabinet that an armed icebreaker and two supply ships had been sent to Archangel, with a view to the barter of the stores they carried and generally to get on good terms with the inhabitants of that district, who were at present indifferent to political affairs and only wished to be fed and left to pursue peaceful avocations.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs pointed out that the position at Archangel differed from that at Murmansk, inasmuch as the former was involved in the general situation as to Russia and intervention by the Allies as a whole via Siberia. Pending, however, a settlement of that question, it was felt that it might be possible to persuade M. Trotzki to agree to the Czech-Slovak force that was now at Kursk being employed in the Archangel or Murmansk district, with a view to preventing encroachments in Russia by forces of the Central Powers or Finland; and it was pointed out that such approval on the part of M. Trotzki would go some way to establish his honesty of purpose with regard to the Allies.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs drew the attention of the War Cabinet to his telegram No. 55 of the 13th April, 1918, to Mr. Lockhart, which set out the policy of His Majesty's Government with regard to Russia.

The War Cabinet requested—

The Secretary of State for War to furnish particulars of the Czech-Slovak force to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to enable the latter to send a telegram to Mr. Lockhart directing him to urge M. Trotzki to authorise the employment of the force in the vicinity of Archangel and Murmansk for the protection of Russian as well as Allied interests.

19. With reference to War Cabinet 380, Minute 5, Sir Eric Geddes stated that an application had been received from the Russian Government, through the British naval attaché, for assistance from us in the re-organisation of the Russian Black Sea.
fleet, which pointed to the likelihood of the Bolsheviks asking generally for Allied assistance.

20. The question was raised as to whether Mr. Lockhart was aware of the fact that we had given instructions that General Semeneff was—for the time being, at all events—to cease his activities in Eastern Siberia.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs undertook to enquire into this matter and to inform Mr. Lockhart as requisite, if such had not already been done.

21. With reference to War Cabinet 127, Minute 5, the attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a question to be asked in the House of Commons as to the steps the Government proposed to take with reference to the atrocities committed by the Germans on British prisoners of war, and whether instant and severe reprisals on German prisoners in our hands would not tend to mitigate the privations of our men.

Lord Derby stated that, on account of the troublesome attitude of the German prisoners in France, it was undesirable, in the present situation, to employ them in the vicinity of the battle-front, and consequently they were being evacuated to England.

The War Cabinet requested—

The Secretary of State for War to arrange for the question in the House of Commons to be postponed for a few days, and, in the meantime, to ascertain, as fully as possible the facts as to the treatment of our prisoners by the Germans in the vicinity of our front, and to render a report on the subject for the consideration of the War Cabinet.

22. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by Major-General Callwell (Paper G.T.-4241).

General Callwell said that the Greek mobilisation was held up mainly for want of clothing and food.

The Prime Minister pointed out that it was very desirable to get some of our troops from Salonica, and this could not be done until the Greeks were mobilised. It was, therefore, most important that the question of sending supplies should be settled immediately.

The War Cabinet requested—

General Smuts to settle the question, in conjunction with the Departments concerned.

23. The War Cabinet had under consideration a Report by a Sub-Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, relative to the establishment of an Appointments Board to deal with the re-settlement of officers of the Army on demobilisation. Doubt was expressed as to whether the present was a suitable time for acquainting the public as to the steps that were being taken as regards demobilisation, and it was felt that, when an announcement of this nature was made, it should also cover the arrangements that were proposed for the re-settlement of the rank and file as well as the officers.

The War Cabinet requested—

General Smuts to go into the question with Lord Derby and Dr. Addison, and to report to the War Cabinet in due course.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 17, 1918.