WAR CABINET, 398.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, April 24, 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.T.E.

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

Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. Smuts, K.C.

The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

The Right Hon. A. Chamberlain, M.P.

The following were also present:—


The Right Hon. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 4).

General Sir H. H. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 4).


The Right Hon. W. H. Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minutes 1 to 11).

The Right Hon. W. S. Churchill, M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minutes 13 and 14).

Sir Stephenson Kent, K.C.B., Ministry of Munitions (for Minutes 13 and 14).

Rear-Admiral G. P. W. Hope, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord (for Minutes 1 to 7).

The Right Hon. T. J. Macnamara, LL.D., M.P., Financial Secretary, Admiralty (for Minute 17).

The Right Hon. Sir J. MacClay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minute 11).

The Right Hon. G. H. Roberts, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minutes 13 to 18).

Sir D. J. Shackleton, K.C.B., Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour (for Minutes 13 to 18).


Major P. Lloyd Geame, M.C., Secretary, Ministry of National Service (for Minutes 13 to 15).


Lieutenant-Colonel L. Wilson, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., Assistant Secretary.

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

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Captain L. F. Burgis, Assistant Secretary.
1. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that the Germans had brought to their front one fresh division, in the vicinity of Robecq.

A question was asked as to when the next offensive on the part of the Germans was likely to take place, and reference was made to a speech which had recently been made by General von Stein, in the Reichstag, which indicated that no large offensive was probable in the immediate future.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff inclined to the same view.

General Wilson stated that at the present moment there were only seventeen fresh German divisions, two of which were composed of Landwehr troops, and were consequently of small fighting value. This represented on the Western front the smallest number of fresh divisions since the offensive began.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 397, Minute 4, the Secretary of State for War reported that the result of the conversations at the War Office with General Pershing was that an agreement had been reached as to the programme for the next six weeks.

The Prime Minister said that it had transpired from a conversation with Captain Guest, who had seen and spoken to American troops embarking from this country for France, that men had been sent forward from the United States without any method, with the result that men with six months' training were to be found side by side with raw recruits. General Pershing had confirmed this information, and had expressed surprise at the occurrence, which he supposed was due to the haste with which the orders to push forward troops had been carried out. He had said that it was necessary to sift and re-organise these troops before they could be employed.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the Germans had three divisions, two of which were in the line and one was in the reserve, opposite the Belgian front.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that General Foch had sent one French division to support the Belgians, and that the move would be completed by to-morrow night. Instructions had also been given to General Plumer and to the Belgians that, in case of attack, the reserves of the two countries were to be co-ordinated. General Wilson added that this meant that by to-morrow night the French would have six infantry and three cavalry divisions in the north of Flanders.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had been in communication with the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief in France in regard to General Trenchard; that Sir Douglas Haig had offered to give General Trenchard immediately the command of a brigade; and that, if such a command was carried out satisfactorily, he hoped to give him the command of a division at a later date.

This gave rise to a short discussion on the subject of the forthcoming debate in Parliament relative to the recent change in the post of Chief of the Staff at the Air Ministry, and the suggestion was made that it would be more suitable if, in view of General Trenchard's unrivalled experience in the air, he were given a command in the Air Service.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that he understood from General Trenchard that, in his view, in the highest interests of the Air Service, he ought not to take up an air command.
It was also stated that General Trenchard had declined to accept a post as Chief of the Air Staff on Sir Douglas Haig's Staff. It was suggested, however, that it was desirable that an Inspector-General of the Air Service might be appointed, with a view to co-ordinating the work of the outlying and home air stations, and for the inspection of equipment and aeroplanes, and that it would be more desirable to utilise General Trenchard's experience in this way than in the field.

General regret was expressed that Lord Rothermere was indisposed, and that the question could not be discussed with him, but, in view of the urgency of the matter, the War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The Prime Minister, Mr. Bonar Law, and General Smuts should, on behalf of the War Cabinet, discuss the question at once with the Under-Secretary for Air.

(b.) The Secretary should send to each member of the War Cabinet a copy of the correspondence between Lord Rothermere and General Trenchard on the subject of the latter's resignation.

Wheat for Italy.

5. Mr. Chamberlain said that Signor Orlando had sent the Italian Ambassador direct to Sir John Beale, asking for more wheat for Italy. The situation was that the arrivals of wheat in each of the Allied countries were short of the programme in approximately the same proportion, but that the difference between the French and ourselves on the one hand, and Italy on the other, was that we had begun the year with several weeks' supply in reserve, and that the French had now been obliged to admit that they also had had several, though not quite as many, weeks' stock in reserve. The Indians, on the other hand, had no reserve and had actually impinged on the new harvest before the new cereal year had commenced. Sir John Beale was of opinion that they had just enough if no exceptional losses of wheat in transit, such as had sometimes taken place, occurred, but that if such exceptional losses did take place they might be very short. Looking at the question purely on the merits, he would be inclined to take this risk. Having regard to the policy which the Cabinet had hitherto pursued of being rather more generous to Italy, and to the fact that our position was so satisfactory that we could afford to spare the wheat, he would be prepared to release 50,000 tons of wheat to Italy, as a reserve in order to relieve the Italian Government from anxiety and to cover any possible sinking of wheat ships. He considered that this would be in harmony with the policy previously pursued towards Italy by His Majesty's Government. Mr. Chamberlain also drew attention to Joint Note No. 22, by the Military Representatives of the Supreme War Council, which indicated that the transport of troops, in the case of an offensive in Italy, would have to be carried out between France and Italy with the greatest possible rapidity, and, consequently, there would be a temporary suspension of all trains carrying coal and supplies for the armies and war factories in Italy. This went to prove that Italy ought not to be left in any danger of being found short of breadstuffs at a critical moment. On the other hand, shipping losses in the Mediterranean were very heavy, and the Minister of Shipping objected to the diversion of more shipping in that direction than was absolutely essential. Mr. Chamberlain stated that he would be prepared to recommend a compromise, namely, that 25,000 tons of wheat should be diverted to Italy.

The War Cabinet authorised—

Mr. Chamberlain to arrange the matter, after consultation as requisite with the Minister of Shipping and the Wheat Commission.
6. The Deputy First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that seven attacks on enemy submarines had been carried out during the past twenty-four hours, some of which promised to render good results.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 397, Minute 2, the Deputy First Sea Lord gave the following summary of the reports that had been received up to date regarding the operations carried out on the night of April 22/23 at Ostend and Zeebrugge. It was intended that an aerial bombardment should have taken place prior to the main operations, but such was impossible, owing to the state of the weather. The "Vindictive" was received with heavy fire, and suffered many casualties before getting alongside the mole. The "Thetis" was also received with heavy fire, and sank just outside the harbour. The "Intrepid" and "Iphigenia" passed round the latter and were sunk in such positions that it is believed that the Bruges Canal is blocked. The majority of the crews were most gallantly taken off by motor-launch No. 282. Our storming and demolition parties which landed on the mole suffered heavy losses from the fire of the German destroyers alongside the mole, but they nevertheless inflicted considerable damage, and their work enabled the block-ships to attain their position. The destroyer "North Star" and the coastal motor-boats came inside the harbour and fired five torpedoes at the German destroyers alongside the wall. The "North Star" was afterwards sunk. The smoke screen, which was made to assist the operations, acted effectively until the wind changed, after the engagement had lasted an hour, which enabled the land batteries to pick up the ships, and consequently casualties resulted. The submarine "C. 3" was blown up in the correct position in the pile-work at the neck of the mole, and a large gap has been observed in the viaduct. The other submarine failed to attain her correct position, and returned into harbour.

As regards Ostend, the wind had changed after the flares had been placed, and the flares were extinguished by enemy gunfire; consequently, the "Sirius" and "Brilliant" were unable to find their correct position. Later observation, however, indicates that there is a sunken object lying between the pier, blocking about two-thirds of the fairway of the harbour, and that another vessel is ashore ½ mile to the east of Ostend. About 500 men were landed on the mole at Zeebrugge, and our total casualties are about 400, from the whole force engaged. In addition to the "North Star," two motor-launches and one coastal motor-boat are missing.

8. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that on Monday night, the 22nd April, five Austrian destroyers were engaged by two of our destroyers in the vicinity of the Otranto barrage, and that the enemy destroyers retreated to Durazzo, our destroyers being supported in the chase by five British and one French destroyer on the Otranto patrol line. As regards damage, the fore magazine of one of our destroyers (the "Hornet") blew up, 3 ranks and ratings being killed and 15 wounded. The other destroyer was fit for service, and had 2 killed and 4 wounded. As the attack took place in the dark it was not possible to say what damage the Austrian destroyers sustained.

9. The question was asked as to whether there was any truth in the rumour that de Valera had been discovered to be in communication with the enemy. No information to this effect had reached any member of the War Cabinet, and there was no reference to it in a private letter from Lord French on the situation which the Prime Minister read to the War Cabinet. From this letter it was seen that preparations in Ireland are for passive rather than active resistance.
to the Military Service Act. Lord French drew attention, *inter alia*, to the necessity of stopping speeches and actions inciting active opposition.

The question was postponed for a more formal discussion.

10. Attention was called to the entire absence of any organised system of propaganda in Ireland. It was pointed out that the United Kingdom had been excluded from the sphere of activities of the Minister of Propaganda, and that Ireland was not a suitable field of action for the War Aims Committee. A suggestion was made, however, that suitable cinema performances might be useful, and it was stated that an American Mission had gone there, and that they might be able to create in the minds of Irishmen an interest in the war.

11. The War Cabinet had under consideration a Report by the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Paper G.T.-487), in which it was stated that the Canadian Government complain of the diversion of shipping from Canadian to United States ports without prior consultation with them.

Mr. Long drew particular attention to the following extract from a telegram from the Governor-General of Canada, dated the 17th April, 1918: "The Canadian Government hope that they may have an explicit assurance that, in respect of matters so vitally concerning this country, His Majesty's Government will not proceed upon the principle of deciding first and consulting the Canadian Government afterwards." Mr. Long stated that he must press for the acceptance of the principle of consultation, as urged by the Canadian Government, and said that feeling on the subject was very strong in Canada, where they were making special efforts to obtain recruits and generally to assist in the prosecution of the war, and consequently keenly felt any omission to consult them in matters of shipping, which affected the vital interests of the Dominion.

The Minister of Shipping stated that he considered it would be a mistake to give a definite assurance that in all cases the Canadian Government would be consulted as to the transfer of shipping, as it was impossible to do under war conditions what it was usual and necessary to do under conditions of peace, and that the move which caused the present trouble was necessitated by the urgency of carrying American troops to France at the earliest possible moment.

Mr. Bonar Law recalled that when he had been Secretary of State for the Colonies a difficulty had arisen with the Canadian Government about the requisitioning of shipping, and that he had been a definite undertaking that such would not be carried out in future without the Dominion Government being consulted.

The War Cabinet decided that—

It was impossible to lay down a condition that the British Government must obtain the prior consent of the Dominion Governments with regard to the diversion of shipping, but requested the Minister of Shipping, if any similar cases arose in the future, to inform the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in order that he could communicate our intentions to the Dominion Governments concerned, with the Colonies being made aware of such personal urgency.

12. With reference to War Cabinet 367, Minute 21, the War Cabinet had under consideration a Report of the War Pensions Warrant Committee (Paper G.-205).

Mr. Barnes pointed out that the two main changes were an increase in the amount payable to children, which would incur an additional expenditure of about £8,000,000, and the addition to alternative pension of the widows of those who have been well-to-do, which meant an extra £3,000,000 or £4,000,000. All the other...
alterations, as set out in the Report, were of a trifling nature, and were necessary as the result of experience gained in the working of the old Pensions Warrant. He added that the Treasury had agreed to the proposals contained in the new Warrant.

The War Cabinet approved the Warrant as set out in Paper G-205.

Man-Power: Mobility of Munitions Labour

13. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by Mr. Churchill, covering a minute by Sir Stephenson Kent (Paper G.T.-4306), dealing with the question of a wide extension of enrolment under the War Munitions Volunteer scheme.

Mr. Churchill stated that, in order to secure the release of the largest possible number of men for the army and to maintain the greatest possible output of munitions, it was indispensable that there should be a greater control of the residuum of labour left behind in the workshops. It was necessary to bring great pressure to bear on everyone to enrol as a War Munitions Volunteer. Those who refused, and were not available to be moved about as required, should be made to understand that they stood a greater chance of being recruited for the army. This proposal had been put to the Trade Union Advisory Committee, and they were wholeheartedly in favour of steps being taken to increase the mobility of the men remaining available for the munitions industry. He did not ask the Trade Union officials to commit themselves to an approval of what might be called "industrial conscription"; he contented himself with the general resolution set forth in the memorandum before the Cabinet. The Advisory Committee were in favour of prompt action being taken. Mr. Churchill added that the removal of absolute protection from trades and groups of workmen had resulted in very striking improvement in output and in methods of production. The proposals which he now was putting forward included the power to regulate and restrict employers in the use of labour of important types of which there was a shortage, and of controlling the engagement of labour by firms who are using labour uneconomically.

Mr. Roberts said that he was in favour of the proposals, provided only moral pressure was used to secure enrolment. If there were any open threat of compulsion there was sure to be trouble. He thought the present moment propitious, and, if action were taken promptly, the proposals might be accepted without much opposition.

Mr. Chamberlain suggested that the public announcement, as drafted in the memorandum, was rather in the nature of a threat to the men who did not enrol. It would be better so to word it as to provide a special encouragement to the man who does enrol, and has shown himself willing to place himself at the disposal of the State.

The War Cabinet decided—

To approve the proposals of the Minister of Munitions, subject to the modification in phrasing suggested by Mr. Chamberlain.

Shipyard Labour.

14. In the course of the discussion on the previous question, attention was called to the lack of co-ordination in the use of labour engaged in munitions and shipyards, and more particularly to the low rate of progress with dilution in Admiralty yards.

The Secretary was requested to place the subject on the Agenda of the War Cabinet of Friday next, the 26th April.

Man-Power: Recruiting in Ireland

15. The War Cabinet had before them a draft Order in Council prepared by the Minister of National Service, postponing indefinitely the transfer by the Army Council to the Minister of National Service of the power to recruit in Ireland (Paper G.T.-4318).

Sir Auckland Geddes explained that, under an Order in Council,
dated the 23rd October, 1917, the powers of recruiting, then vested in the Army Council, were transferred to the Ministry of National Service. The Order contained a provision that the Minister might postpone its operation as regards any particular area in the United Kingdom up to the 1st May, 1918. Under this provision, the transfer of recruiting in Ireland had remained under the control of the Army Council. In view of the present circumstances in Ireland, he proposed that no change should be made. If the Order in Council were not issued, recruiting would pass automatically to the Minister of National Service.

Mr. Duke concurred in the proposal of Sir Auckland Geddes. The War Cabinet decided—

To submit the draft Order in Council to His Majesty.

15. With reference to War Cabinet 273, Minute 20, the War Cabinet had before them the Report of the Sub-Committee dealing with the distribution of the British Empire Medal, with a covering note from Sir George Cave (Paper G.T.-4208).

Sir George Cave explained that the Cabinet's proposal to distribute the medal in the proportion of one to every hundred workers, the recipient to be nominated by the workpeople, had not been found to be acceptable, the reason being given that where all had worked well, such a distinction would be invidious. The list of awards made at the New Year was limited to persons who had performed acts of great courage and self-sacrifice in different kinds of war service. That list had been very well received, and the Sub-Committee now suggested that the difficulties of distributing the medal on the basis originally proposed should be met by—

(a.) Limiting the British Empire Medal to acts of courage or self-sacrifice, or specially distinguished service.
(b.) Issuing at the end of the war a general medal to all persons who had rendered war service for a certain length of time and are not otherwise disqualified.

Sir George Cave pointed out that it was not necessary to come to a decision on the second of the proposals at present.

The War Cabinet decided—

To approve the first proposal.

17. The War Cabinet had before them the draft of a Bill to amend the law relating to naval prize of war (Paper G.T.-4312).

Dr. Macnamara explained that before the present war prize-money was given to the actual captors. The unfairness of this procedure had led to a discussion by the Admiralty in 1911, and, as a result, it had been agreed to recommend that prize-money should be pooled for the whole of the fleet and distributed under suitable regulations, so that all could share in it, whether captors or otherwise. The present Bill had been drafted to give effect to this proposal. In reply to a question, Dr. Macnamara said that a summary of the proposals had been circulated to the dominions, and that, after discussion had taken place and certain amendments had been made, no objection had been raised to them by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The War Cabinet authorised—

The Board of Admiralty to proceed with the Bill.

18. The attention of the War Cabinet was called to a dispute, arising from an application for an increase of wages, between the National Transport Workers' Federation and the Port of London Authority. The workmen were willing to proceed to arbitration, but Lord Devonport, acting on behalf of the Port and Harbour
authorities of the Kingdom, was not only opposed to arbitration, but unwilling to comply with the Arbitration Award if it went against the Port Authorities. The Ministry of Labour wished to proclaim a strike, so that the issue should be decided under the Munitions of War Acts. The men were in the right legally, as they were free to demand an increase in wages so long as they were prepared to accept arbitration upon it.

The War Cabinet decided:

To authorise the Ministry of Labour to advise His Majesty to issue the proposed proclamation.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
April 24, 1918.