WAR CABINET, 418.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, May 27, 1918, at 12 noon.

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. G. N. BARNES, M.P.

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

The following were also present:—

The Right Hon. LORD ROBERT CECIL, Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.


Major-General F. H. STYKES, C.B., C.M.G., Chief of the Air Staff.


Rear-Admiral G. P. W. HOPE, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord (for Minutes 1 to 4).

Mr. PHILIP KERR (for Minute 9).

Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., Secretary.

Lieutenant-Colonel L. STORR, Assistant Secretary.

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

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

The Western Front.

1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that information had just been received to the effect that the IXth Corps, which was holding a 30-kilometre line on the Chemin des Dames, had been attacked by the Germans, and that, as far as our knowledge went at present, there were indications that they had been driven off the top of the ridge. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that this corps was composed of four tired British divisions, which had replaced four French divisions formerly stationed in this area, the latter having been sent to reinforce the IInd Army.
2. The Deputy First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet as follows, relative to losses of enemy submarines:

(a) Submarine "H. 4" had sunk a German submarine in the Straits of Otranto, two survivors being picked up. Unfortunately, the enemy submarine was carrying British prisoners who had been taken from the steamer "Snowdon."

(b) Patrol craft "No. 60" ran over a submarine in the vicinity of Trevose Head, a heavy explosion taking place shortly after the patrol craft cleared the submarine. The patrol vessel was considerably damaged.

(c) A seaplane attacked a submarine in the vicinity of Portland, and wreckage came to the surface.

(d) A further report stated that the armed yacht "Lorna" had sunk an enemy submarine 2½ miles from Portland Bill on the same day, capturing one survivor.

As regards the reports under (c) and (d), the Deputy First Sea Lord stated that verification was necessary as to whether one or two submarines had been sunk.

3. The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that a telegram had been received from H.M.S. "Suffolk" to the effect that a big demonstration took place at Vladivostock on 22nd May, public bodies and workmen, numbering 10,000, protesting against the Soviet taking over municipal powers, speeches being delivered against Bolshevism, and in favour of universal suffrage. There was great enthusiasm, but no disorder. The Commanding Officer of the "Suffolk" had added that the present moment appeared most favourable for the Allies to declare their intentions of following a firm line of policy.

4. With reference to War Cabinet 413, Minute 12, the Deputy First Sea Lord stated that the captain of the "Suffolk" had also telegraphed that the Czechs are not willing to interfere in Russian affairs, that they wish to fight on the Western front, but that great efforts are being made by enemy agents to turn them away from their purpose. He adds that the men are of splendid physique with good discipline and some years of war experience, and should prove a valuable force: 10,000 are now at Vladivostock, and another 13,000 are expected shortly.

5. Lord Robert Cecil informed the War Cabinet that the French Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was due to arrive in London that evening. The principal object of his visit was probably to discuss the policy to be pursued in regard to Russia.

The War Cabinet decided that—

M. Pichon should be invited to confer with the Prime Minister, Mr. Balfour, and Lord Robert Cecil at 11 a.m. the following day, in the Cabinet Room, prior to a meeting of the War Cabinet at noon.

Lord Robert Cecil undertook to invite M. Pichon's attendance. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was instructed to arrange to attend, in case his presence be required.

6. Lord Robert Cecil stated that affairs in South Persia were in a rather disturbed state. Recent restlessness in that quarter had culminated in the preaching of a jihad by Soult, the leader of the Kashgai tribe (Sir C. Marling's telegram No. 446, dated the
24th May, 1918), and the siege of Fort Khanet Zinian, held by a
detachment of the South Persian Rifles, by a body of Kashgai
estimated at about 2,000 men. The hostile movement appeared to
be spreading. As prompt action was necessary, and time would not
admit of the Eastern Committee being consulted, Lord Robert Cecil
had telegraphed on Saturday to Sir C. Marling, giving Sir Percy
Sykes full authority to act as he thought best.

Lord Curzon, as Chairman of the Eastern Committee, said that
the area of the present disturbance was between Shiraz and the sea.
Sir Percy Sykes had under him the South Persian Rifles, who
constituted a scattered unreliable force of about 5,000 men, in regard
to whose loyalty we had lately received somewhat ominous reports,
and, in addition, approximately 1,200 Indian troops near Shiraz.
Lord Curzon considered that Lord Robert Cecil had no alternative
but to act as he had done. The Eastern Committee was to meet the
following afternoon, and would discuss the situation and the measures
to be taken to meet it.

The War Cabinet decided that—
The matter should be dealt with by the Eastern Committee.

Russia:
The Czecho-Slovak
Council.

7. The War Cabinet had under consideration a note by Lord
Robert Cecil on the subject of the Czecho-Slovak National Council,
and a draft letter addressed to Dr. Beneš, the London representative
of the Czecho-Slovak Council (Paper G.T.-4647).

Lord Robert Cecil pointed out that a request had been put
forward by the Czecho-Slovak National Council to the effect that the
British Government should accord it the same recognition as had
been given to it by the French and Italian Governments. Lord Robert
Cecil said that he proposed to address a letter, as drafted, to the
London representative of the Czecho-Slovak Council, which, while
giving them the measure of recognition desired, would not commit
the Government to any increased war obligations.

The War Cabinet approved the draft letter to the London
representative of the Czecho-Slovak Council.

Replacement of
Vessels Lost by
War Risks.

8. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the
Minister of Shipping, with reference to the proposal to replace
vessels lost by war risks, by giving the owner a standard ship
(Paper G.T.-4616).

As there was no dispute on the subject of this proposal, the
War Cabinet requested—
The Chancellor of the Exchequer to confer with the Minister of
Shipping with reference to the answer to be sent to the
owners who had made the application.

American
Reinforcements.

9. With reference to War Cabinet 412, Minute 13, the Prime
Minister referred to the recent telegrams which had been received
on the subject of American reinforcements from Lord Reading
(Nos. 2329, 2356, and other telegrams which had been received
from the War Office from the British Mission at Washington).
Mr. Lloyd George said that, while these telegrams were fairly clear
as to the number of troops which were being sent, it was very
difficult to ascertain from them what actual numbers of American
reinforcements were available in France at the present time, or
what the position, as regards these reinforcements, would be for the
next two months.

The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that during
May 160,000 American troops would reach France. These, however,
were not all infantry and machine-guns, as other services had
been brought over, including field engineers, signallers, and
ambulances. Of these 160,000, it might be reckoned that 60 per
cent to 70 per cent. would be infantry and machine-guns.
General Harington said that, in his opinion, there should be 70 American battalions complete by the end of this month, and that, of the 10 divisions which would reinforce the British Army, the elements of 9 were in France, and the advance party of the 10th had arrived; 113,000 Americans had arrived in France this month, and he had just heard of another 40,000 sailing between the 18th and 24th May, of which 20,000 were infantry and 3,000 machine-gunners.

The Prime Minister said that it was very important that the Cabinet should know how many American infantry there would be available for use by the end of May, and to what extent the American troops in France would be available to repair the damage which would be done by the second German offensive of this year, and for a third German offensive when it came.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff promised to procure the information desired, but said that he had already asked Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig to send him a return every Saturday stating how many Americans would be put into line by the following Saturday. He would therefore have a statement on this subject to lay before the War Cabinet every Monday. Sir Douglas Haig had informed him that there would be, by the 1st June, three American battalions in the line held by the British troops, and that a further six were in training behind the line. Sir Douglas Haig was of opinion that, if necessary, these battalions in training could be used if the German offensive continued for any time, but General Foch was not so optimistic, and had expressed the opinion that it would be better for these battalions to be employed on the southern portion of the line. General Wilson said that he had just received a message from Sir Douglas Haig, who, after a conference with General Foch, had now changed his plans, and come to the conclusion that it was undesirable to put the American battalions into cadre divisions, and had decided that they should be trained for three or four weeks in back areas first. General Wilson said that this decision might alter all the arrangements as regards transport, &c., which had been made. General Wilson pointed out that the American rule was that all the American troops arriving in France were supposed to have had not less than five months' training before starting. It was evident that many of these troops had not had such training, and, owing to the unequal degree of efficiency of the battalions sent, Sir Douglas Haig had desired to take out of each battalion now in France men unfit to go in the line, and put the remainder of the battalion in, though under strength. General Foch suggested that it was more desirable to earmark battalions in categories according as they were ready to go into the line.

The Prime Minister pointed out that, although President Wilson was insisting on five months' training (telegram No. 2356), it was clear that the training which the American troops were receiving in America was in no way adequate, and Mr. Lloyd George suggested that it would be better for the American troops to be brought as soon as possible, either to England or France, where they could be trained under officers who had had practical experience of modern warfare. Mr. Lloyd George was strongly of opinion that any proposals on this head should be clearly put forward in a memorandum to be laid before the Supreme War Council at Versailles by General Foch, as General-in-Chief of the Allied Forces on the Western front. There was another point which, Mr. Lloyd George emphasised, was of the greatest importance, namely, the steps which were being taken by the authorities in America for having an army available and ready for operations in 1919.

General Wilson, when asked whether General Foch had any idea as to how many American troops he required, said that he (General Wilson) aimed at 100 divisions from America; but Mr. Lloyd George pointed out that, according to present arrangements, there would only be 42 American divisions in France by
June next year, of which 28 would be combatant divisions and 14 replacement divisions.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The Chief of the Imperial General Staff should prepare two memoranda for the consideration of the War Cabinet.

The first memorandum should show:

(i.) The number of American infantry and machine-guns available for the reinforcement of the British line at the present time;

(ii.) The number of such reinforcements which are likely to be available in six weeks' time;

(iii.) The total assistance which may be expected to be available as the result of the American promise to brigade American battalions with the British Army.

The second memorandum to show:

(i.) The preparations which were being made by the Americans to get in readiness an army available for operations in 1919;

(ii.) The recommendations which should be made at the Supreme War Council on the subject of the numbers and the training of this army.

(b.) Before the next meeting of the Supreme War Council the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should place himself in communication with General Foch, with a view to the latter making a statement to the Supreme War Council on the above subjects.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
May 27, 1918.