WAR CABINET. 419.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Tuesday, May 28, 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. BONAR LAW, M.P.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. LORD ROBERT CECIL, K.C., M.P., Minister of Blockade.
The Right Hon. the LORD NEWTON, Controller, Prisoners of War Department (for Minute 10).

The Right Hon. the EARL STANHOPE, D.S.O., M.C., General Staff (for Minute 10).

Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., Secretary.
Captain L. F. BURGIS, Assistant Secretary.
Mr. THOMAS JONES, Assistant Secretary.
Paymaster-in-Chief P. H. ROW, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
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The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

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

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P., Minister of Blockade.

The Right Hon. the Lord Newton, Controller, Prisoners of War Department (for Minute 10).

Lieutenant-Colonel Earl Stanhope, D.S.O., M.C., General Staff (for Minute 10).

The Right Hon. Austen Chamberlain, M.P.

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


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 7).

General Sir H. H. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 9).


Captain L. F. Burgess, Assistant Secretary.

Mr. Thomas Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Paymaster-in-Chief P. H. Row, R.N., Assistant Secretary.
1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported, with the aid of a map, that, after a heavy bombardment yesterday morning from the line Leuilly, north of Soissons, to Brimont, north of Rheims, the enemy had attacked on a 50-kilometre front, and had advanced to an extreme depth of 14 miles and an average depth of about 8 miles. They had apparently crossed the Chemin des Dames, the Aisne, the next rise, and the River Vesle. Up to last night, 15 divisions had been identified, and there may have been another 5, making 20 in all. There were 4 of our divisions, 3 in the front line and 1 in reserve. The French had 3, and possibly 4, divisions in front, with 3 in the rear, making 10, 11, or 12 divisions, as far as was now known. Nothing was yet known of the losses in men or guns, but it seemed probable that a large number of guns must have been lost. The British had given up much less ground than the French, but whether this was due to a heavier attack on the French was not known. Tanks and gas were mentioned as having been used by the enemy. General Foch was moving up 5 divisions. Possibly the enemy hoped that the Allied reserves would be tempted to come down from the north, and, in view of their initial success, it was possible that the enemy would convert the present attack into their main offensive, with Paris as its objective. The reverse was a substantial one, and disquieting from the point of view of the moral of the troops. The Chemin des Dames and the line of the Aisne were very strong lines.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 416, Minute 2, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that a telegram had been received from M. Clemenceau, inviting Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and his Chief of Staff to the next Meeting of the Supreme War Council at Versailles.

It was pointed out that, in view of the military situation on the Western front, Versailles might prove to be an inconvenient meeting place for the Generals, and it was agreed to await developments before finally fixing on the place of meeting.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that between 31st October, 1917, and 21st May, 1918, it was estimated that we had inflicted 75,500 gross casualties on the enemy in Palestine. Of this number, 6,200 were killed, and 20,300 were prisoners.

4. The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet that--

(a.) With reference to War Cabinet 418, Minute 2 (d), further details had been received, confirming the report of the sinking of a submarine by the armed yacht "Lorna." One survivor had been recovered, who stated that the submarine was the "U. 74."

(b.) A report had been received from Santander that the propellers, rudder, engine parts, and spare gear were being removed from the interned submarine "U. 56."

5. The First Sea Lord reported the sinking, by torpedo, of the steamship "Leasowe Castle," with 3,200 troops on board, about 100 miles from Alexandria, at 10:30 p.m. on the 26th May. 2,400 troops had been rescued, and it was reported that the remainder were in boats. The transport was on her way to France, and was one of five ships escorted by six destroyers.
The Adriatic

6. The First Sea Lord stated that a report had just been received of a successful attack by aeroplane on a destroyer at Durazzo. The destroyer had been directly hit, and had been seen to turn over and sink. This was the first time that such a result had been observed with absolute certainty.

Austrian Dreadnought torpedoed.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 413, Minute 9, the First Sea Lord said that no confirmation of the sinking of an Austrian Dreadnought had been received. The Austrians had issued no reports on the subject.


8. Lord Curzon raised the question of the use of French and British troops held in reserve and in the fighting line. Lord Curzon said that he was under the impression that, taking the front line from the sea down to the Somme, British troops were being used to do all the fighting in this sector, whilst the French troops were held in reserve. He thought that there was a good deal of feeling in the country on this point, and he anticipated that questions might be asked in Parliament.

In reply, it was stated that the sector from the sea to the Somme was the British sector, and that it was only natural that British troops should do most of the fighting. When an attack took place in the sector held by the French, as in the case of the present attack on the Chemin des Dames, the French troops did most of the fighting.

It was pointed out that eleven French divisions were being used in the North, and that the line recently held by us on the Somme was now almost exclusively held by French troops.

Supplies to the Armies in France.

9. Lord Curzon also raised the question of the supply of the Allied Forces in France. He said that there was now a long line in which British, French, and American troops were interspersed, and the question of their supply naturally arose. He feared that we should have a very strong demand made upon us for the unity of the supply services.

It was stated that Lord Milner was now in Paris discussing this question, but that there was little fear of our having to hand over the control of our supply services to one of our Allies. In this respect we had all the cards in our own hands, inasmuch as the supply of the whole of the armies in France would break down were it not for shipping, over which we had complete control.

The Prime Minister said that this problem would probably be raised at the next meeting of the Supreme War Council.

Exchange of Prisoners of War.

10. With reference to War Cabinet 417, Minute 17, the War Cabinet had under consideration a memorandum by Lord Newton on a proposed exchange of combatant and civilian prisoners between England and Germany (Paper G.T.-4667).

Lord Newton stated that it was a matter for the Cabinet to decide—

(a.) Whether they would make an exchange on the same lines as had recently been agreed upon by the French; and
(b.) Who should be sent to The Hague to represent the British Government in such an eventuality.

He added that there were approximately 35,000 British non-commissioned officers and men who had been in captivity for over eighteen months, the German figures being approximately the same. As regards combatant prisoners, we had in our hands, both here and
in France, about 124,000, and the British combatant prisoners in German hands were at the present moment believed to be over 150,000. With regard to civilians, there were about 21,000 interned here, and about 10,000 interned in the Dominions. On the other hand, there were only about 4,000 British civilians interned in Germany. With regard to the claims of the Admiralty that naval submarine ratings should not be exchanged, Lord Newton considered that this could be achieved by releasing rather more German civilians than would be the case in a man-for-man exchange. Lord Newton stated that the proceedings in carrying out any exchange, such as had been suggested, would be very lengthy.

Attention was drawn to telegram No. 1929 of the 27th May, 1918, from The Hague, which indicated that General Friederich had, on behalf of the German Government, expressed himself willing to take part in a conference to deal with the repatriation of prisoners, and such other subjects as might be raised.

With reference to the question as to whether, if we effected exchanges, the Germans would carry out their part of the contract not to employ men—

(a.) On the front,
(b.) On lines of communication,
(c.) In occupied territory.

General Belfield suggested that they might use their released combatant prisoners and civilians in Russia, and advance the plea that, as they were at peace with Russia, the men were not being employed on military operations. This would result in combatants being released from the German troops on the Eastern front for employment on the Western front. General Belfield stated, however, that there was nothing to prevent our using any of our non-commissioned officers and men that might be released for the purpose of training troops preparing for the front, and that there was no objection to their being sent abroad, to, say, India and Gibraltar, and they might also be sent to Ireland for recruiting purposes. General Belfield further mentioned that the military members of the Army Council were averse, on military grounds, to any exchange of prisoners, and he understood that it was their intention to put forward, for the information of the War Cabinet, their reasons for this view. He also pointed out that, if we entered into an exchange agreement with the Germans, although 35,000 might represent the number of combatants now over eighteen months in captivity, and therefore likely to be exchanged if agreement was reached between the two Governments, the terms of the French agreement were such that the longer the war went on with the more men we should release, inasmuch as the Germans would probably endeavour to come to a "running agreement" with us, as they had done in regard to their arrangements with the French. General Belfield concluded by stating that, in his opinion, if it was explained to our prisoners in Germany that by being released from captivity they would materially assist the Germans, they would one and all refuse to accept such release.

As against these arguments against an agreement, it was pointed out that, owing to the French having reached one with the Germans, we were placed in an extremely difficult position, more particularly as our number of prisoners was far smaller than those of the French, and, consequently, public opinion would be strongly opposed to the French prisoners in this matter receiving preferential treatment, although it was pointed out that there was some evidence, given by prisoners who had escaped from Rubleben, indicating that their lot was not such a hard one as recent publications in the press had led the British public to imagine.

The First Lord hoped that, if any exchange was negotiated, all German submarine prisoners should be eliminated from the terms of any agreement, and pointed out that, if we were called
upon to release those prisoners now in our hands, it would be equivalent to giving the Germans efficient crews for ten submarines.

The Prime Minister suggested that, in any agreement arrived at, we should follow generally the lines of the recently concluded Franco-German agreement, and thus throw the responsibility largely on to the French, and that, at the same time, he should take an early opportunity of informing M. Clemenceau of our views in this matter, and of the effect that any considerable exchange of prisoners would have on the available man-power of Germany during the next year.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) British delegates should be sent to The Hague to discuss with the German delegates certain urgent questions relating to prisoners of war, and that, amongst other matters, they should consider a wide scheme of exchange of prisoners, following generally the lines of the recently concluded Franco-German agreement, but omitting any consideration of the release of German submarine prisoners now in this country.

(b.) An announcement to this effect should be made in both Houses of Parliament.

(c.) The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should inform the British Minister at The Hague of the War Cabinet's decision.

(d.) The Prime Minister should discuss the matter with M. Clemenceau at the first convenient opportunity.

(e.) The question as to what delegates should represent the British Government should be further considered by the War Cabinet after receiving the views of the Admiralty and the War Office in the matter.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
May 28, 1918.