WAR CABINET, 462.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.,
on Wednesday, August 21, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:

The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, M.P. (in the Chair).

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

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

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. LORD ROBERT CECIL, K.C., M.P., Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1-7).

The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1-7).


Major-General F. H. SYKES, C.M.G., Chief of the Air Staff (for Minutes 1-6).

Major P. LLOYD GEAME, M.C., Secretary, Ministry of National Service (for Minute 7).

Major-General B. F. BURNETT-HITCHCOCK, C.B., D.S.O., Director of Mobilisation (for Minute 7).

Admiral Sir R. E. WEMYSS, G.C.B., K.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 1-6).

The Right Hon. SIR A. H. STANLEY, M.P., President of the Board of Trade (for Minute 7).

The Right Hon. G. H. ROBERTS, M.P., Minister of Labour (for Minute 7).


Mr. W. A. S. HEWINS, M.P., Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minute 7).

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

Lieutenant-Colonel L. STORR, Assistant Secretary.

Captain L. F. BURGIS, 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 General Byng’s army had attacked that morning on a front of between 10 and 12 miles, and, according to telephonic communication received from France, was meeting with very little opposition. General Wilson hoped to receive further particulars of this attack later in the day.

The Enemy’s Intentions.

Austrian Divisions.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the intentions of the enemy at the present moment were a little difficult to fathom, and he thought that the impression which the War Cabinet had formed some days ago, that the Amiens advance might involve us in a second Passchendaele, should now be corrected. In the operations which Marshal Foch was now undertaking he had no intention of involving himself in a battle which would result in heavy casualties; he intended only to advance as far as he could with as little loss as possible. If the French advance of the previous day was accomplished with nothing but their front line troops—which was the case as far as General Wilson’s information went—the theory might be put forward that the Germans did not wish to put up a fight, but intended to fall back to some line in rear. This theory, however, could not be supported when one remembered that the French had taken 8,000 prisoners. It was possible that the Germans desired to put water between our forces and theirs, in order to hamper the work of our tanks. In this case the Germans would probably go back to the River Ailette in front of the French, and back to the Somme in front of the British.

General Smuts said that the present attitude of the Germans bore out what he had been told at General Headquarters some time ago, that the German divisions in the line were not capable of a big military effort, and that their good divisions were resting. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said, however, that good German divisions had been in the line, and Prince Rupprecht’s reserve was now reduced from thirty-five to eight divisions.

General Smuts said there was a possibility that the Germans intended to fall back to their old Hindenburg line, as the area they would have to evacuate was of no importance. Nevertheless, if this was the German intention, it was difficult to understand why they were not conducting the retreat in an orderly manner and should allow so many prisoners to be captured.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, according to German orders which had been captured, there was no doubt that the enemy’s discipline was becoming very shaky. There had been a good deal of looting in the rear, and the continued disobedience to orders was causing the German Higher Command considerable anxiety. He would not go so far as to say, however, that complete demoralisation had set in, but he wished the Cabinet to realise that we were now confronted with a different situation from that which had obtained at Passchendaele.

General Wilson then informed the War Cabinet of the possible positions to which the Germans might withdraw. He thought it unlikely that they would evacuate Lille, but would prefer to use that town as a pivot. If the Germans withdrew to the old Hindenburg line, they would save thirteen divisions; if they fell back to a line between Lille and Rheims, they would save twenty-two divisions. The shortest line of all for the Germans to fall back upon would be, of course, the river Meuse. This would effect a saving of, possibly, fifty or sixty divisions.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that another factor in the situation was the discovery of one, or perhaps two or three, Austrian divisions in the line. The French, although they had not actually captured Austrian prisoners, had picked up Austrian equip-
ment of a division near the apex of the St. Mihiel salient. This showed (1) that the enemy was very hard pressed for men, and (2) that the Germans had probably given up any idea of attacking Italy. In answer to a question, General Wilson said that there were no signs of German divisions being sent to Italy to replace the Austrian divisions.

Further evidence of the German shortage of man-power was disclosed by the fact that they were bringing a number of German women into Belgium to do the work of men in their auxiliary services, and in one area alone 15,000 women were being brought in.

With regard to the German forces in Finland, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, according to a despatch received that morning, the number of Germans in that country was lower than the estimate, but so far there had been no trace of German units being moved from that country.

3. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to telegram No. 122, dated the 19th August, 1918, from Vladivostock, and a telegram to the War Office, No. 25, dated the 19th August, 1918, with regard to the situation of the Czecho-Slovak forces, and the desire expressed by the Japanese to increase their force by 6,000 or 7,000 men.

Lord Curzon said that the position of the Czecho-Slovak forces was more than precarious, and that the refusal of President Wilson to allow the Japanese to increase their force threw upon him a very great moral responsibility if the Czecho-Slovaks were exterminated.

Mr. Chamberlain suggested that the gist of the two telegrams mentioned above should be telegraphed to Marshal Foch, and that the Marshal should communicate with President Wilson, urging the relief of this force, and emphasising the important bearing it would have on the present operations on the Western front if the German anxieties in the East were increased.

Lord Robert Cecil said that he thought any attempt to bring further pressure to bear on President Wilson with regard to this subject might produce an opposite result to that which we desired. The President was well aware of the British Government’s views on this matter, but his policy was not ours; he did not believe in the possibility of reconstituting the Eastern front, and it was a principle of President Wilson’s not to intervene in the internal affairs of any country unless requested to do so by the inhabitants. Lord Robert Cecil was, however, telegraphing that day to the Japanese and to the Czecho-Slovaks. He thought that if the Czecho-Slovaks themselves appealed direct to President Wilson it might have more effect. In addition, all the telegrams received by the Foreign Office on this subject were repeated in full to Washington for the President’s information.

It was suggested that the present moment was particularly appropriate for Marshal Foch to place his views before President Wilson, in view of the present situation on the Western front, and Marshal Foch might state that, unless the Czecho-Slovak forces were relieved, his campaign in the West would be ruined.

The War Cabinet decided that—

Lord Robert Cecil should consult Lord Reading as to the following courses:—

(a.) To forward to President Wilson the two telegrams mentioned above, without comment;
(b.) To accompany the two telegrams by a statement that we did not wish to put further pressure on the President, whose views we respected even though we did not share them, but that we felt bound to communicate to him this information;
(c.) The desirability of moving Marshal Foch to make a separate communication, in which case the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should take the necessary action.

Lord Robert Cecil was empowered to initiate such action as he might agree with Lord Reading.

The First Sea Lord reported that a Belgian Relief ship had been torpedoed on the afternoon of the 20th August, off the Norwegian coast. He had not received full information with regard to this incident, but it was possible that this ship had been sunk inside territorial waters.

The First Sea Lord stated that confirmation had been received of the sinking of an enemy submarine on the 18th instant.

The First Sea Lord stated that one of our submarines had observed an enemy submarine passing through Norwegian territorial waters.

In this connection Mr. Chamberlain drew attention to Sir M. Findlay's telegram No. 2874 K., of the 18th instant, which emphasised the importance of keeping the United States of America in line with us in any action we might take in this matter. He attached great weight to the following passage, paraphrased from Sir M. Findlay's telegram:—

"That the United States should participate in the hint that the Allies would be forced to act themselves unless Norway either acted or allowed us to do so, and that the United States should share in such action if it were taken."

Mr. Chamberlain thought that it was of the first importance politically that United States forces should be engaged in any mine-laying operations we might undertake in Norwegian territorial waters.

The First Sea Lord said he thought that this could be done.

Lord Robert Cecil stated that he had telegraphed to the Allied Capitals asking for their support in this matter, but so far he had received no reply.

The War Cabinet had under consideration a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War on the subject of the release, before general demobilisation, of "demobilisers" or "pivotal" men.

The Secretary of State for War explained that the Reconstruction Committee on Army Demobilisation had recommended that special arrangements should be made with the War Office by the Ministry of Labour, before the end of the war, if possible, for priority in demobilising, immediately peace is assured, "pivotal" men, and pointed out that if such a scheme was adopted steps must be taken as soon as possible to set up, where it did not now exist, machinery for selecting industries to be recognised as entitled to claim such men, and for earmarking the individuals to be released accordingly. Such a scheme must necessarily entail reference by the Ministry of Labour to representatives of many industries, and would involve a certain amount of unavoidable publicity. Lord Milner did not put forward any objections to the scheme, but said that he considered War Cabinet sanction must be obtained before any further steps were taken.
The Minister of Labour said that the necessary work would be done in consultation with the various Departments concerned. A number of men were required in many industries in order to restart them, and men were also required in Government Departments in order to carry out the demobilisation scheme. Mr. Roberts urged that the names of “pivotal” men required in the industries should be selected now, so that there should not be, on demobilisation, any industrial chaos, which, in his opinion, would otherwise occur.

General Smuts expressed the view that to carry this scheme into effect would have very dangerous results. Already, owing to recent victories on the Western front, a “peace atmosphere” had been created, and to select men by name to be released on demobilisation would, in his opinion, aggravate an already dangerous position.

The Deputy Minister of Munitions stated that the numbers to be released would be very large, and would run into many thousands. His Department would be able to carry the scheme into effect by means of the Labour Department of the Ministry of Munitions working in conjunction with the Advisory Committee and the Trades Unions concerned. General Seely brought to the notice of the War Cabinet the views of Sir J. Stevenson, who took the opposite view to the majority of the Munitions Council, which was in favour of the scheme, and said that Sir J. Stevenson thought it was most inadvisable and unnecessary. Sir J. Stevenson had expressed the opinion that there would be sufficient time to demobilise the necessary “pivotal” men when the Peace Conference sat, and that the adoption of the scheme at the present time would create great disturbances in the labour world.

It was pointed out that the War Cabinet had already approved of the general principles laid down in the Second Interim Report of the Committee on the Demobilisation of the Army (War Cabinet 274, Minute 14), but the opinion was generally expressed that if the scheme was adopted many difficulties would be created.

Mr. Chamberlain urged that the Dominion representatives felt strongly that their troops had a claim to early demobilisation, that every industry would consider if it would be able to obtain men under this scheme, that the gravest labour difficulties would be caused far in advance of the time when peace was assured, either if men, or even numbers, were selected, and that the military authorities had always expressed the opinion very strongly that British stores and supplies could never be returned to England unless the Army abroad was demobilised by units.

The President of the Board of Trade was not in favour of the proposals, and said that, whatever system was adopted, it was certain that many men selected as “pivotal” men for certain industries would find employment elsewhere.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Secretary of State for War should bring this question up for the further consideration of the War Cabinet in three months' time.

8. The War Cabinet had before them a note by the Secretary (Paper G.T.-5458) (Appendix), asking for the War Cabinet’s instructions in respect of the circulation of papers to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions between the sessions of the Imperial War Cabinet, and also to the resident or visiting Ministers of the Dominions nominated by the Prime Ministers as their representatives at the Imperial War Cabinet when the Prime Ministers themselves are not sitting.
The War Cabinet decided that—

Papers should not be sent to Prime Ministers' representatives in this country, but that important papers pertinent to the business of the Imperial War Cabinet should be forwarded to the Prime Ministers, the selection to be left to the Secretary's discretion, subject to reference to the War Cabinet when necessary, and instructed the Secretary to take the necessary action.

(Initialled) A. B. L.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
August 21, 1918.
APPENDIX.

G.T.-5458.

Circulation of Papers to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions and to their Representatives in this Country.

Note by the Secretary.

I ENCLOSE, for the information of the War Cabinet, a copy of a letter which Sir Robert Borden has written to the Prime Minister on the subject of the circulation of papers to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions between the meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet. I should be glad to receive the instructions of the War Cabinet on this matter, and I should like to raise, at the same time, the question of the papers to be sent to the resident or visiting Ministers of the Dominions nominated by the Prime Ministers as their representatives at the Imperial War Cabinet when the Prime Ministers themselves are not present.

It is not a very easy matter for this Office to decide exactly which papers are worth sending to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions. The course I would recommend for the consideration of the War Cabinet is that copies of all papers, other than those of purely domestic interest in the United Kingdom, excepting papers of extreme secrecy, the circulation of which is usually confined within the narrowest possible limits, should be sent to the representative Ministers on the Imperial War Cabinet in London, and that they should be asked to select those papers which they consider should be sent to the Prime Minister of their Dominion. To illustrate how this would work in practice, all papers, other than the two categories mentioned, would be sent to Sir E. Kemp, and he would be asked to notify me of those which he thinks should go to Sir Robert Borden.

I would propose to meet the case of those Dominions who have no nominated representative Minister by detailing an officer in my office to submit to me the list of papers to be sent.

A further question arises in this connection. Should the resident or visiting Ministers in London receive copies of the Foreign Office and War Office telegrams which have during the last few weeks been sent to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions in London? This is a matter which concerns the Foreign Office and War Office rather than this office, but it is so closely connected with the general question that I venture to raise it in this note.

(Signed) M. P. A. HANKEY, Secretary.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W. 1,
August 20, 1918.

Enclosure to G.T.-5458.

Dear Mr. Lloyd George,

IT seems very desirable that some arrangement should be made whereby, during the interval between the sessions of the Imperial War Cabinet, important papers which are circulated throughout the year to the members of the British War Cabinet could be sent out to the Dominions for the information of the Dominion members. It is an almost impossible task on our arrival here to give careful attention to the mass of documents which we find confronting us. Some of the papers could doubtless be sent out in the regular bag which goes from here to Ottawa; as to others, it would probably be necessary to arrange for a special messenger service. This, I should think, would not be difficult.

For myself, I should like to see all the important papers, and especially, perhaps, those relating to the United States of America, her forces and her war effort generally, the Siberian expedition, and Russia generally, and the League of Nations. I do not, however, in mentioning these special matters wish to be understood as in any sense excluding other subjects.

The arrangement would seem to be a natural consequence of the decision recently reached in the Imperial War Cabinet.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) R. L. BORDEN.