Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Friday, September 20, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:

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


Rear-Admiral G. P. W. Hope, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord.


Lieutenant-Colonel W. Dally Jones, C.M.G., Acting Secretary.

Captain L. F. Burgess, 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 reported that twenty-one German divisions had been used during the last thirty-six hours' fighting on the Western front against the attack launched by the IIIrd and IVth Armies. These divisions were evidently very tired, and were divisions some of which had been put in a second time. At the most, the number of British divisions employed could have been fifteen, but it was not clear whether this number had been used in full. The Germans had thought that their counter-offensive would stop our attack, but it had been entirely unsuccessful in doing so. The Germans had attacked in close formation, and had suffered very heavy punishment indeed. On the whole, our operations had been eminently successful, and up to 3.30 p.m. on the previous day the capture of 10,000 prisoners had been reported. The strategic value of the attack lay in the fact that the advance gave the British forces two positions of observations which were invaluable for any possible future operations.
2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that heavy troop train movements had been observed from the west to the east on the Western front, passing through Liège. General Wilson expressed the opinion that these trains were moving several divisions to Alsace, as General Ludendorff was undoubtedly getting very anxious about the American force in that district. Information had been received which looked as though Mülhausen and Metz were being cleared.

Palestine.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, from information received, it appeared that the Arabs had blown up a railway bridge 70 miles north of the position the British troops were now holding. If this were correct, the railway communication of the Turkish army would be cut, and General Allenby’s operations would be greatly assisted. General Wilson explained the position on the map, and pointed out that, if the retreat of the Turkish army to Damascus was cut off it would be possible for General Allenby to capture the bulk of the enemy forces opposed to him, which consisted of from 13,000 to 15,000 Turks, and about 2,500 to 3,000 Germans.

The attention of the War Cabinet was again called to the work which Colonel Lawrence was doing with the Arab forces, and General Wilson undertook to make enquiries with regard to suitable recognition being given to Colonel Lawrence for his valuable services.

Salonica.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, according to reports received from Salonica up to 2 p.m. on 18th September, the cavalry had advanced some 40 kilom. If it was possible for them to advance another 40 kilom. they would be able to cut the main railway line which fed the whole country, and this would probably mean a general retirement. The British forces had attacked on either side of Lake Doiran, but had not made any considerable progress.

The Italian Front.

5. Questioned as to whether there was any possibility of an offensive on the Italian front, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff replied in the negative. General Wilson also pointed out that it was now too late for operations on the front owing to the shortness of daylight, snow, and other climatic conditions, and that Lord Cavan had always been opposed to any offensive in Italy starting after the 15th of this month.

Press Reports on the doings of Colonial Troops.

6. The attention of the War Cabinet was called to the fact that so much credit was continuously being given in the newspapers to the doings of Colonial troops on the Western front, and so little in comparison to what had been done by units belonging to the British Army.

Lord Curzon suggested that a telegram should be sent to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, informing him that the War Cabinet was impressed by the undue prominence given in allocation of praise to the Dominion troops, mentioning, at the same time, that there was no trace of such undue prominence in his reports.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that he was proceeding to France shortly, and suggested that perhaps it would be better if he brought this matter to the notice of Sir Douglas Haig when he saw him.

It was pointed out that the war correspondents for the British newspapers reported the doings of the Colonial troops, in addition
to the special reports of the Colonial correspondents, and it was con­
considered that it was largely owing to this fact that more prominent notice was given to the doings of the Colonial troops. The opinion was expressed that the Minister of Information had already realised this, having lately adverted to the fact that the numbers of men enlisted and the numbers of casualties in the British Armies were proportionately in excess of those of all the Colonies.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a) The Chief of the Imperial General Staff should, on his next visit to France, bring this matter to the notice of the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief.

(b) The Secretary should interview Lord Beaverbrook, and bring to his notice the opinion of the War Cabinet on this matter, and request him to take such steps as he considered necessary, so that the doings of the British troops should receive equal recognition in the press with those of the Colonials.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 473, Minute 4, regarding the attempts which were being made by the Allies in Siberia to raise Russian levies, Mr. Balfour said that our relations with the United States Government in this matter were far from satisfactory. In fact, the whole question of the lack of cohesion amongst the Allies in the direction of executive action in Siberia was to him a source of great anxiety. He constantly received telegrams from General Knox urging that certain action was absolutely necessary, and he (Mr. Balfour) found himself in the position of being unable to assist General Knox in any degree, as approval to any proposal made by our representative in Siberia had to be obtained from our Allies before action could be taken. If he (Mr. Balfour) telegraphed to Washington supporting a proposal put forward by General Knox he knew that this would have the very opposite effect from what was desired. This position of affairs was of extreme gravity, and was liable to paralyse him diplomatically. Then, again, to add to the difficulties of the situation, the Soviets were all at sixes and sevens. The only sign of unity was the fact that the Japanese were in command. As time went on, unless something was done to remedy the necessity of having to consult five different Powers before any action could be taken in Siberia, matters would get worse. In addition, he had to cope with the supposition of the United States Government that we were endeavouring to push them into an enterprise of which they were suspicious. Mr. Balfour thought that, in order to co-ordinate Allied action, something was required similar to the Versailles Council, only differently constituted, to sit at Washington. One of his reasons for suggesting this was that, whenever President Wilson sent over anyone from the United States to represent him on an affair of international importance, should that person take a view which supported one of the Allies and not the President in any particular matter that might arise, the President immediately thought his emissary had been "go at" by the Ally concerned. There was no way of remedying this except by the Council which he had suggested. The Versailles Council consisted of a permanent body of soldiers, occasionally supplemented by a transitory body of big officials, such as Prime Ministers. Mr. Balfour did not propose that the Council at Washington should be constituted on these lines, but should probably be a body, composed of soldiers and civilians, able to take decisions and give orders. The members would, of course, have the right to appeal to their parent Governments, and we should be in constant communication with our own representatives, but he thought that, in the main, the Council would be able to act
collectively and quickly. As regards the place of meeting, Mr. Balfour had suggested Washington, but he thought the Japanese might object to this on the grounds that they were providing the Commander-in-Chief and the troops, and that Tokyo would be nearer to the scene of operations. On the other hand, Washington was more central and more accessible from an Allied point of view.

At a later stage in the discussion the desirability of Vladivostock as the place of meeting was discussed, and there was a general agreement that, if possible, this would be the best selection.

Mr. Balfour undertook to draft a telegram on this subject for circulation to the members of the War Cabinet for their consideration.

Mr. Bonar Law then raised the question of the decision arrived at by the Cabinet on the previous Tuesday (War Cabinet 473, Minute 4) with regard to General Knox's request to raise 3,000 Russians with the assistance of General Dietrichs. The decision, as set down in the Minutes, represented the agreement arrived at by the War Cabinet, but he understood that Mr. Balfour and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff had met after the Cabinet Meeting and were not entirely in accord with the decision as recorded.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, when he saw Mr. Balfour on Tuesday afternoon, they drafted a telegram which had been sent off to General Knox. This telegram did not give permission to General Knox to raise the 3,000 men, but told him that he should help in every possible way, as far as our material was concerned, to raise these men.

Mr. Balfour said that he was rather nervous of our giving permission to General Knox to raise these men without first consulting the French and United States Governments.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff intimated that if it would help the Foreign Secretary in his negotiations with the French the War Office would be willing to waive any pretensions they might have that General Knox should ultimately exercise control over the forces raised. Rather than quarrel with the French, he was quite prepared for General Knox to serve under the French nominee, General Paris.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) Before authorising General Knox to proceed with the raising of the 3,000 Russians, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should telegraph to the French and United States Governments, informing them of the steps we proposed to take, adding that, in view of the extreme urgency of the matter, if they had any objections we should be glad to know of them speedily.

(b.) The foregoing decision should govern Minute 4 of War Cabinet 473.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 472, Minute 9, attention was drawn to telegrams Nos. 3281 and 3283 from Sir M. Findlay, containing reports by the Netherlands Minister at Petrograd on the situation in Russia as affecting in particular British subjects and British interests under the Netherlands Minister's protection.

It was pointed out that two questions arose which demanded an early reply:

(i.) Whether it was possible for the British Government to do anything in order to secure the early release of British officials and others now imprisoned.

(ii.) If it were diplomatically feasible, would it be possible to publish a portion of telegram No. 3281, which dealt so fully with the horrible condition of the prisoners, saying that the information came from a trustworthy and independent source?
The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs expressed the opinion that some care was necessary before any action was taken, as the author of the report would otherwise be compromised. The shock and agony to relatives of those imprisoned must also be taken into consideration, and he agreed with the suggestion that it was possible that the author of the report was not a little hysterical in what he wrote, judging from some of the statements which he made.

Lord Curzon asked whether something could not be done to save the prisoners, either by invoking international action or by means of a counter-threat. He pointed out that some three weeks had now elapsed since the death of Captain Cromie, and a week or more since the release of M. Litvinoff, and suggested that M. Litvinoff should be interviewed and informed that the British Government could not allow the present state of affairs to go on, and that if the British officials were not released within a certain fixed time it would be necessary to reincarcerae him.

Mr. Balfour read a wireless telegram which he had that moment received. The telegram was from M. Chicherin, and was to the effect that the Russian Government was still ready to grant permission to the British officials to return via Finland at the moment when a message was received that M. Litvinoff was on board a steamer and leaving England. The telegram proceeded to lay down certain conditions which Mr. Balfour characterised as "very insolent," but said that, at the same time, he would be prepared to accept many conditions so long as it was possible to procure the escape of our own people, who undoubtedly were being slowly killed. Questioned as to whether he considered it advisable for this telegram to be shown to Litvinoff, Mr. Balfour said that he was of opinion that Mr. Leeper should see M. Litvinoff and discuss the telegram with him. Mr. Balfour at the same time pointed out that, if M. Chicherin would promise to send the British subjects across the border, we should retain our hold on M. Litvinoff even after he had sailed, as it would be some days before he got to Bergen.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should draft a statement, based on telegram No. 3281 from Sir M. Findlay, on the situation in Russia as affecting British subjects, for the consideration of the War Cabinet as to the desirability of its publication.

9. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a note from the French Embassy (Paper G.T.-5724) calling attention to the acts of devastation committed by the German troops during their present withdrawal on French territory, and asking for the views of His Majesty's Government in regard to the proposal to secure a solemn declaration on the part of the Allies, having as its object the punishment of and reparation for these crimes.

It was generally agreed that the British Government would express the warmest sympathy with the French Government in the proposals put forward, but at the same time it would be desirable that suggestions as to actual method should be more precise.

In the absence of the Prime Minister the War Cabinet deferred further discussion of this subject.
10. With reference to War Cabinet 223, Minute 2, and War Cabinet 233, Minute 9, Mr. Barnes called attention to a statement which had been made at the Labour Conference last year, to the effect that a conference of financiers had been held in Switzerland. At that time a statement was issued by the Government saying there was no foundation, in fact, for this report. "The New Statesman" had now, in its last week's edition, said that a Conference was held in Geneva last autumn, and had mentioned the names of three persons present, including that of Mr. Bell, a member of Lloyd's Bank, and Mr. Furstenburg, who was intimately connected with Herr Scheidemann.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs undertook to make enquiries into this matter and to inform Mr. Barnes.

11. With reference to War Cabinet 474, Minute 1, the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a statement to the War Cabinet on the railway situation. Mr. Bonar Law said that, when the War Cabinet decided to authorise no larger rise in wages than 5s., both Mr. Barnes and the President of the Board of Trade were very firm in giving no indication of any possibility of the War Cabinet receding from that decision. Mr. Bonar Law had interviewed Mr. J. H. Thomas on the previous day, and he had found him very reasonable. On pointing out to Mr. Thomas that it was quite impossible to go beyond the 5s. agreed upon, for even if a further 1s. were advanced it would mean the War Cabinet had been forced to reconsider their decision because of a vote of the men, Mr. Thomas did not press for any further advance, and it was arranged that Mr. Bonar Law on behalf of the Prime Minister should see the Executive. This meeting was held at 10, Downing Street, and Mr. Barnes, Sir A. Stanley, and Sir H. Walker were present. Mr. Bonar Law stated and emphasised the reasons which made it impossible for the Government to go beyond the offer already made. Later on, the executives, reversing the previous decision for a strike, which had been carried by a majority of two, decided on settlement on the War Cabinet's terms by a majority of 37 against 26. The only branch which had not accepted these terms was the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, but Mr. Bonar Law expressed the opinion that this Association would similarly agree. Mr. Bonar Law said he regretted that the press had not given sufficient prominence to the firm attitude adopted by the Government.

Mr. Barnes pointed out that this could be done now, and that perhaps it would have been inadvisable to make too much of this before a settlement had been arrived at. He also testified to the very fine way in which Cabinet decision had been supported in the negotiations by Sir A. Stanley and the Railway Executive.

Mr. Bonar Law desired to emphasise the great assistance which Mr. J. H. Thomas had rendered towards a settlement, and expressed the opinion that he had acted throughout in a reasonable and patriotic manner.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
September 20, 1918.