WAR CABINET, 481.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, October 2, 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 following were also present:—

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 9).

The Right Hon. Lord Robert Cecil, K.C., M.P., Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1 to 9).

The Right Hon. the Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War (for Minutes 1 to 9).

Major-General P. P. De B. Radcliffe, C.B., D.S.O., Director of Military Operations (for Minutes 1 to 8).

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

The Right Hon. W. Long, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies (for Minute 9).

The Right Hon. E. S. Montagu, M.P., Secretary of State for India (for Minute 9).

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

The Right Hon. the Earl of Reading, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., K.G., His Majesty's High Commissioner and Special Ambassador to the United States of America (for Minutes 1 to 9).


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

Lieutenant-Colonel L. S. Storrs, Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.

Captain L. F. Burgis, Assistant Secretary.

Western Front.

1. THE Director of Military Operations reported that there was no fresh information beyond that which had already appeared in the communiqués.

With regard to the capture of St. Quentin, which had been taken by the French, this was a regular bastion in the Hindenburg line, and the French could not have taken it without the support which was rendered by the British to the north of the town. It was reported that the Germans had now evacuated the whole of St. Quentin except a suburb on the east side.

The Director of Military Operations reported that there had been very heavy fighting round Cambrai, and it was probable that the German casualties would be exceedingly heavy. The Canadian
troops had done very well: they had beaten off the German counter-attacks, and finally had made progress. It was expected that Cambrai would soon fall.

Palestine.

2. The Director of Military Operations reported that General Allenby had taken Damascus at 6 a.m. on the previous day. He understood that instructions had been sent to the effect that the Arab flag should be hoisted in Damascus.

Macedonia.

3. The Director of Military Operations reported that there was no fresh news from Macedonia except that thirty-four German battalions were believed to be in Macedonia, of which sixteen had already been identified. Some of these troops had come from Roumania, some from Crimea, and one regiment which had been taken away from Palestine had been identified.

Mesopotamia.

4. The War Cabinet had their attention drawn to the importance of our taking advantage of our successes in Palestine and Syria to exploit the situation in Mesopotamia; and some anxiety was expressed as to the small degree of progress which General Marshall appeared to be making in that theatre of war. The Director of Military Operations said that General Marshall's progress was largely a question of transport; he was pushing forward to the Caspian, and was making full use of all the transport available, but in so doing he had been obliged to demobilise to some extent the rest of his forces under his command.

The Secretary of State for War said that the War Office were fully impressed with the importance of advancing as far as possible in Mesopotamia, and more particularly the capturing of Aleppo, and thus getting control of both the lines. He undertook that any steps for exploiting the situation in Mesopotamia, which were feasible, should be taken.

Surrender of Bulgaria.

5. In continuation of War Cabinet 480, Minute 1, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that he had received a visit from the French Ambassador on the previous day, when M. Cambon had informed him of certain supplementary provisions which had been added to the terms of the armistice. One of those additions was in the sense that any occupation of strategic points should be carried out by the three Great Powers, excluding Serbia and Greece. The second of the additional provisions was that three Bulgarian divisions were to be left mobilised and efficient. One of those divisions was to guard the northern approaches and the crossings of the Danube; the second was to guard the eastern approaches from Turkey; and the third was to control the railways under our orders.

The War Cabinet requested the Director of Military Operations to telegraph to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who had gone to Paris, the above information in regard to keeping the three Bulgarian divisions mobilised.

Allied Policy in Siberia.

6. With reference to War Cabinet 471, Minute 5, the War Cabinet had before them a draft despatch by Lord Robert Cecil, which it was proposed to send to Washington, with regard to Allied policy in Siberia (Appendix).

Mr. Balfour said that he wished to have the view of our military authorities as to whether we were able to do anything in European Russia if America refused to help beyond the point she had indicated.
The Director of Military Operations said that the success of the Archangel expedition, in the War Office view, depended on the force of our intervention from the East, and, owing to the delays in the despatch of United States troops, there was little likelihood of these two forces joining hands before the winter.

Lord Robert Cecil said that his only doubt was whether he had stated too definitely in his despatch that our military authorities took the view that we should be able to hold the line of the Volga.

The Director of Military Operations said that he thought it might be too late now to do this. He did not, however, think it quite impossible to hold the line of the Volga, as the situation in the East changed so much from day to day, and was greatly influenced by the events on the Western front.

Lord Robert Cecil said that President Wilson's view was that he would send supplies to Siberia, but would not guarantee to send them beyond the Urals. He wanted to know whether our military authorities thought that we should be able to hold the line of the Volga, as the situation in the East changed so much from day to day, and was greatly influenced by the events on the Western front.

The Director of Military Operations said that he could not answer this question off-hand, but he doubted if much could be done without the assistance of American supplies.

Mr. Balfour said there was always a possibility that the Japanese might say that the American Government having laid down the line of policy that was to be followed in Siberia, they (the Japanese Government) did not feel inclined to go beyond that policy, and if the British Government proposed to render full assistance to the Czechs it would have to be done with the assistance of the French and Italians only.

It was suggested that the only alternative to sending this despatch was for us to go on without giving any information to President Wilson.

Lord Reading said that he agreed absolutely with Lord Robert Cecil's draft, and it was exactly the way in which he himself would have approached the President. He thought it would be unwise not to inform President Wilson of the steps we proposed to take.

Lord Curzon said that he was not afraid of what President Wilson might reply to our despatch, but he did fear that if we were not able to effect a junction with the Czechs to the west of the Urals there might be a military disaster. We were undertaking a dangerous and precarious task.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The draft despatch should be sent to Washington, but that it should not emphasise too strongly the point that our military authorities thought we should be able to hold the line of the Volga.

7. With reference to War Cabinet 475, Minute 7, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Paper No. G.T.-5828) with regard to the raising, by General Knox, of a force of 3,000 men with the assistance of General Dietrichs.

The approval of the War Cabinet having already been given for the raising of these men (War Cabinet 475, Minute 7), the War Cabinet requested—

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to telegraph to Washington informing the United States Government of the steps we had taken, adding at the same time that we did not consider our undertaking inconsistent with American policy.
8. With reference to War Cabinet 475, Minute 9, the War Cabinet had before them a note by Mr. Balfour, covering a memorandum from the French Embassy (Paper No. G.T.-5724), together with a note from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs covering a note from the War Office (G.T.-5842), with regard to the question of Reparation for Acts of Devastation performed by the Germans in France.

Mr. Balfour said that this raised a very difficult question, for if Germany surrendered at discretion, he did not see how it was possible to draw up a list of French towns that had been unnecessarily destroyed by the Germans, and say that we would destroy a like number of German towns. Then a policy of this sort assumed that our army would cross the Rhine into Germany.

Mr. Balfour suggested to the War Cabinet that as the memorandum from the French Embassy did not give a very clear idea of what the French Government proposed to do, he should make a sympathetic reply to the French Government, and request them to put forward some formulated plan for the consideration of the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet approved of Mr. Balfour's suggestion.

League of Nations.

9. With reference to War Cabinet 457, Minute 8, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by Mr. Barnes (Paper No. G.T.-5815) on the subject of the League of Nations.

Mr. Barnes thought that the time had come for the Cabinet to examine the question on its practical side. Hitherto the League had been freely discussed only in rhetorical terms, and he was afraid that, if no advance was made beyond that stage, when peace came it would be lost sight of altogether. It was highly desirable that the Allies should come to some mutual understanding on the subject. Such understanding, however, must necessarily be preceded by a discussion on the part of each of the Allies if their views were to reach any degree of clearness before the time came to discuss terms of peace. At present no precise views on the question had been formulated. Meanwhile the Germans were exploiting the idea, and it might be dangerous to let them be first in the field with definite proposals. He believed that if the scheme of a League of Nations admitted the adherence of a democratic Germany, and this were made known to the German peoples, it might bring a satisfactory ending to the war appreciably nearer.

Mr. Balfour said that, as had been pointed out at the meeting of the War Cabinet when the question had last been discussed on the 13th August, the main difficulty in the way of Mr. Barnes' suggestion was the President of the United States. His Majesty's Government had appointed the Phillimore Committee to examine the whole question, and had received the Committee's Interim Report, which had been sent to the President with a proposal that it should be published as a basis for discussion. President Wilson, however, had so far made no move in the matter. He suggested that the President might be privately informed that Lord Reading was empowered by His Majesty's Government to discuss the question with him unofficially and informally, as the British Government greatly desired to work hand in hand with the United States, and attached importance to some amicable mutual arrangement being reached by the two Governments before the question was referred to the other belligerents. He proposed to ask Lord Robert Cecil to study the reports of the Phillimore and French Committees and to draw up a memorandum which would differentiate between those points which were controversial and those which were, in the main, generally acceptable. As soon as this memorandum had been drafted, Ministers might meet at the Foreign Office to discuss the question quite informally, in order
that Lord Reading might be fully acquainted with the views of the Government before he returned to the States. On his arrival there he would, by means of private conversations, ascertain the views of the United States Government, and he would, of course, keep the Foreign Office au courant with all that emerged from those conversations.

Lord Robert Cecil said that, just before President Wilson had made his last speech, he was shown a copy of it by the United States Chargé d’Affaires, and had been asked to say how His Majesty’s Government regarded the different propositions put forward in the speech. In Lord Robert’s view, the whole point of the speech lay in the reference to the League of Nations, in respect of which the President had made two very definite propositions: (a) that the League of Nations must come into existence at the Peace Conference, and (b) that it must include all free nations. He thought that our reply to this should be that we agreed that the League of Nations must come into operation at the Peace Conference; that the Allies must have a definite scheme to bring forward; and that the Allies must, further, set up a special conference to discuss and prepare that scheme. He thought we should further say, as regards the place of assembly for the Conference, we ourselves were quite prepared to agree to its meeting at Washington, in which case it would be left to the President to issue invitations to the principal co-belligerents.

Lord Reading said that the reason why the President had objected to the immediate publication of the Report of the Phillimore Committee was that, if it were published, it would generally be regarded as having been issued under the aegis of the British Government. This would force the hand of other Governments and raise a premature discussion. President Wilson’s view was that there must be some kind of general agreement on the subject among the co-belligerents before any Peace Conference met, and he wished in the first instance to discuss the question with the British Government, so that they might concert some agreed scheme for a League of Nations before it was submitted to the other chief Entente Powers. Lord Reading said that he himself, like the President, attached great importance to the desirability of the question being discussed in the first instance between Great Britain and the United States alone, in order that they could arrive at a working basis before the matter went further. The crux, in his view, was the final “sanction,” but this was not a matter of principle; the difficulty was how to enforce the decrees of any international council or tribunal. Lord Reading expressed his readiness to take the earliest opportunity, on his return to the States, of ascertaining what the views of the President were; but before he left England it was essential that he should be fully seized of the views of His Majesty’s Government. He understood that there was no question of his arriving at any definite understanding with the President, but that he was merely instructed to conduct an interchange of opinions.

Lord Curzon agreed that, before Lord Reading initiated any informal conversations at Washington, it was necessary that he should be fully apprised of the attitude of His Majesty’s Government. To this end he thought that Ministers should be given an early opportunity of expressing, informally or otherwise, their considered views on many difficult points raised in the Phillimore Report, e.g., the idea of an International Court, whose decisions would be enforced, had been rejected by the Phillimore Committee, which had recommended that international coercion should only be applied in order to enforce the holding of a Conference which should endeavour to arrive at a pacific settlement of international disputes. To his mind, the test question was, How were the decrees of the Conference to be enforced? Was the necessary pressure to be military or economical in character? If military, was it to be
international? There was the further important question of control of armaments, supplies, &c.

Mr. Montagu said that, in his opinion, the two most difficult problems were: (a) the question of the "sanction," and (b) the treatment of our present enemies. In regard to this latter, were we to have no peace with the Hohenzollerns, and were we to state that the German peoples should not be admitted to the League at present, but might be later when deemed fit for admission? Our Colonies also had to be considered, and these would certainly not wish the Germans to be allowed to enter the League until they had given acceptable guarantees of their future good behaviour.

The Secretary reminded the War Cabinet that when the question had been discussed at their 457th Meeting, the Prime Ministers of the Dominions had been present, and it was well known that some of them held strong views on the subject. He suggested, therefore, that these Prime Ministers would naturally expect, when the question of a League of Nations was again discussed by His Majesty's Government, that either they or their representatives in this country would be invited to attend.

This view was generally accepted, but Mr. Long pointed out that Mr. Hughes and Mr. Lloyd were the only Prime Ministers at present in England. If the League of Nations were discussed with the representatives of the Dominions it was very important that Sir Robert Borden's views should be represented, more particularly as he was believed to take an entirely different view from Mr. Hughes. Sir George Kemp, however, who, in the ordinary course, would have been invited to represent Sir Robert Borden, was at present in Canada. In these circumstances, as an essential preliminary to a discussion with the representatives of the Dominions, he would have to telegraph for Sir Robert Borden's views. Unfortunately this would involve delay, as Sir Robert Borden was absent on a holiday, and not easily accessible.

It was generally agreed that any considerable delay was very undesirable, and that, at this stage, a formal discussion by the War Cabinet or Imperial War Cabinets was premature.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a.) The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should arrange for an informal meeting of Ministers, to be held at the Foreign Office at an early date, not to take any formal decision, but further to explore the subject of a League of Nations, in order to give Lord Reading an opportunity to acquaint himself with the general trend of the views held by members of His Majesty's Government thereon, before his return to the United States.

(b.) That, as a preliminary to this short discussion, Lord R. Cecil should circulate a memorandum on the line suggested by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

(c.) That Lord Reading should take the earliest opportunity, after his arrival at Washington, of initiating private and unofficial conversations with the President, or any officials deputed by him, with a view to the free and frank interchange of views on the subject.

(d.) That Lord Reading should report from time to time to the Foreign Office the result of the said conversations, and that he should make it clear to the President that such conversations in no way committed His Majesty's Government to any agreement on the subject, or to any definite line of action.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 2, 1918.
APPENDIX.

Draft Telegram to Mr. Barclay, Washington.

YOUR telegram No. 4386.

We fully appreciate the attitude of the United States Government and their desire to act in such a matter in accordance with the advice of their military authorities. Our position is, however, a little different from theirs. In the first place, our military authorities do not take the same view. As far as they are able to judge, the Czechs, if given full support by the Allies, should be able, in conjunction with the forces under General Alexief, to hold the line of the Volga against any force that is likely to be brought there. The position is very obscure, and possibly further information might modify their judgment, but that is the present view taken by our soldiers. Apart from this, we feel the very greatest reluctance to abandon the elements in Russia loyal to the Allies. General Alexief, for instance, has fought throughout the war against our enemies, and in the early part of it he and his troops rendered essential and heroic services to the Allied cause. Since the revolution he has never wavered, and we know that he has resisted many approaches from the German side, backed though they were by old associates of his, such as Miliukof. We feel, therefore, honourably bound to do our very utmost, even at some risk to our own interests, to come to his assistance. If we were now to ask the Czechs to withdraw to the east of the Urals, that would be to cut off from Alexief and those with him their last hope of Allied assistance. We therefore propose, subject to any observation that the United States Government may have to make, to present this view of the situation to our French and Japanese Allies, and to appeal to them to continue their efforts to stand by our friends in European Russia. We quite recognize that the above considerations do not apply to the United States in the same way as they do to those who fought side by side with the Russians in the early part of the war, and the British Government will quite understand it if the American Government feel unable to take a more active line than that indicated in the telegram under reply. We venture, however, to express the hope that the American Government will appreciate our position in the matter and will not think it amiss if we endeavour to carry out the task that seems to be imposed upon us by obligations of honour. In short, if they feel unable to assist us beyond the point indicated, we hope that they will not discourage our other Allies from helping us.