War Cabinet, 485.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Monday, October 14, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:
The Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kelleston, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.,
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P.
The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. Smuts, K.C.
The Right Hon. A. Chamberlain, M.P.

The following were also present:—
The Right Hon. the Earl of Reading, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., His Majesty's High Commissioner and Special Ambassador to the United States of America.

The Right Hon. Viscount Milner, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War.
General Sir H. H. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff (for Minutes 1 to 4).
Admiral Sir R. E. Wemyss, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff (for Minutes 1 to 7).

Major the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.
Lieutenant-Colonel L. Storr, Assistant Secretary.

Captured Guns.

1. It was suggested that some of the enemy guns recently captured on the Western front by our troops might prove very useful for purposes of advertisement in view of the present War Bonds Campaign.

The War Cabinet decided —

That the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should take steps to secure the immediate return of the guns recently captured on the Western front with a view to their exhibition in this country, if possible, in connection with the present War Bonds Campaign.
Western Front.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff informed the War Cabinet that the enemy had, by a counter-attack, driven the Americans out of Grand-Pré. The Americans had attempted to re-take it this morning without success. At 5:30 this morning, the British, French, and Belgian troops had commenced an attack near Ypres. The attack was apparently progressing successfully, and the Allied troops had already advanced 3 or 4 kilom. According to the report received just before the meeting of the Cabinet, our forces were now on the outskirts of Menin and had taken the Fort of Roulers, and were astride of the railway south of that place. The military situation generally was most satisfactory. The French had, during the week-end, recovered a large amount of ground without encountering much opposition.

Western Front:
Shortage of American Troops.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that Field-Marshal Haig had recently asked for more American troops, but had been informed by General Weygand that American headquarters were complaining of a shortage of men. Since the 26th September they had suffered 35,000 casualties. They had a deficit of 90,000 men, and present reinforcements only amounted to 20,000.

Polish Army.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the French had given the command of the Polish Army to General Halle, who had a certain number of Polish troops under him in France.

Western Front:
Naval Support.

5. The First Sea Lord said that our operations in Flanders were being supported by monitors and light craft operating along the Belgian coast, where they were making numerous feints.

Mediterranean.

6. The First Sea Lord reported that the French pre-Dreadnought battleship “Voltaire” had been torpedoed, but had managed to get into Milo Harbour.

The loss of the “Leinster.”

7. The First Sea Lord said that when the “Leinster” had been torpedoed two of our destroyers were in close vicinity. It was impossible to provide escorts everywhere, owing to the lack of destroyers and to the great strain upon destroyer personnel. Every endeavour was made to make up for this defect by the use of constant patrols. The daily sailings across the Irish Channel were made by 22-knot light-draught vessels which were just as well able to defend themselves as destroyers. As a consequence of the loss of the “Leinster,” the Admiralty had received a telegram from the Stewards’ Association stating that if the Admiralty would not guarantee to provide regular escorts at once, the members of the Association would refuse to sail. In reply to a statement sent to them by the Admiralty setting forth the limiting factors in the provision of escorts, referred to above, the Stewards’ Association had stated that the explanation was not acceptable, and that the question would be raised in Parliament.
8. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that a meeting had been held on the previous day (Sunday) at the Prime Minister's house at which naval and military representatives were present in addition to himself, and discussion took place upon the latest phases of the situation occasioned by the German reply to President Wilson's note. The result of this discussion was embodied in two telegrams which had been despatched to our representative at Washington (Nos. 6182 and 6183, dated 13th October).

The main object of the British deliberations had been to make it clear that it would be fatal to the interests of the Allies unless the armistice with the Central Powers was based upon such naval and military conditions as would prevent Germany reopening the war in the event of a breakdown in the negotiations to be based upon the interpretation of President Wilson's Fourteen Points.

There were two questions arising out of the Fourteen Points which were capable of wide variation in interpretation, namely (1) The Freedom of the Seas, and (2) The Fate of the German Colonies.

The Germans appeared to think that mere evacuation of the Allied soil occupied by their troops was sufficient to obtain the concurrence of the Allies to begin discussion.

Lord Curzon stated that, unless it was quite clear from the terms of the armistice that Germany was defeated, it would be fatal to commence negotiations.

Mr. Chamberlain pointed out that the President of the United States of America would not propose an armistice to the Allies until the enemy had consented to evacuation. This made it quite clear to the German Government that actual terms of armistice had not yet been considered, and that the undertaking to evacuate Allied territory was only a condition precedent to the consideration of the terms of an armistice.

Lord Robert Cecil added, that in President Wilson's note the Allies were not bound to give an armistice even if the enemy had evacuated or had agreed to evacuate Allied territory.

Lord Reading thought that the President was not in any difficulty, and that the hypothesis put forward by him to the German Government amounted to the condition that if the German Government agreed to his terms he would then consult the Allies.

Attention was drawn to the comments which had appeared upon the situation in the London press that morning.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that it was most unfortunate that, owing to the attitude adopted by the French and Italian Ministers in objecting to publication of the telegram sent to President Wilson from Paris (No. 1229), we were debarred from giving a lead to the British public.

The Prime Minister stated that both M. Clemenceau and Signor Orlando had been most anxious that no public statement should be made, even in Parliament.

Mr. Bonar Law stated that, in the event of Mr. Asquith asking him the question in the House of Commons, he would reply that it would be impossible to make any statement upon the situation without consultation with the Allies.

In this connection it was suggested that the circumstances should be communicated confidentially to Mr. Asquith.

Lord Robert Cecil stated that the French and Italian Ministers had taken this firm attitude with regard to our silence concerning the situation, because they felt that it would be extremely difficult to make any statement without appearing to make a reflection upon the wisdom of President Wilson.

Mr. Balfour stated that the French attitude was quite clear upon the question of the armistice, namely, that the mere evacuation of Allied territory was quite insufficient, and that they took the view that the German armies must retire at least to the Rhine.

Lord Reading stated that he was very much concerned regarding the interpretation placed by the American Government upon
the phrase "The Freedom of the Seas," and he would like guidance as to the interpretation placed upon it by the British Government before returning to Washington.

Mr. Balfour stated that he understood that the Admiralty were preparing a memorandum upon this subject.

Mr. Chamberlain thought that the Foreign Office should also be asked to draft a memorandum on this subject in detail, and also that we should lose no time in informing the President of the United States of America that we could not accept the German interpretation of the phrase "The Freedom of the Seas."

Mr. Balfour stated that, in regard to the German colonies, we were bound to see that German South-West Africa reverted to the Union of South Africa, and the case of the German colonies in the Pacific to the Australasian Dominions.

The Prime Minister asked General Smuts whether it would be possible to summon a small Indaba of Native Chiefs in the ex-German colonies in Africa, which could be put in as evidence at the Peace Conference, with regard to the wishes of the native inhabitants.

General Smuts replied that evidence in this respect had already been compiled, which was of a most complete character, against the idea that any of these colonies should be returned to Germany.

Lord Robert Cecil stated that, while undoubtedly a great case had been made out against the return of the colonies to Germany, it was not so easy to make out the case for our keeping them.

On this point, Lord Reading received during the meeting a telegram from a confidential source in America, stating that his informant had seen President Wilson, who was pleased with the situation, and was happy over the explanation given in regard to what had happened at Versailles, indicating the probability that a person in the confidence of the President might start shortly for Europe. In view of this telegram, Lord Reading presumed that he would remain in England until he had seen the American representative.

The Prime Minister asked whether it was considered worth while suggesting to the American Government that they should send officers to the ex-German colonies with the view to President Wilson being informed directly concerning them.

Mr. Balfour thought that such a course might be desirable if they could ensure the selection of officers who were both impartial and competent. This would not be easy.

The telegram just received by Lord Reading made reference to a telegram that had been despatched by Sir Eric Geddes to the Prime Minister, and in view of the fact that neither this nor any communication from the President had yet been received, the War Cabinet decided—

To adjourn the discussion.

Future Government of the Middle East.

9. The War Cabinet had before them a copy of a letter from Lord Robert Cecil to M. Pichon, covering a memorandum on the subject of the future government in the Middle East (Paper G.T.-3955) (Appendix). Lord Robert Cecil stated that during his recent visit to Paris he had been approached by M. Pichon in regard to this question, and he had thereupon drafted the memorandum now before the Cabinet. The memorandum had been shown to the Prime Minister, who gave it his full approval, and it had then been sent to M. Pichon, with a personal letter from Lord Robert explaining that it must be regarded as provisional for the present, as it had not yet received the formal sanction of the War Cabinet.

Lord Curzon said that the Eastern Committee had, at a recent
meeting, discussed the report of the Anglo-French Conference held at the Foreign Office on the 30th ultimo, at which an agreement had been drawn up by those present, subject to the confirmation of the British and French Governments, in respect of the areas of special French interest as described in the Anglo-French Agreement of 1916, which were, or might be, occupied by the Allied forces of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. The Eastern Committee had hesitated to recommend the adoption of the report by the War Cabinet, as its terms seemed to commit His Majesty's Government rather further than the Committee considered advisable without certain guarantees. These guarantees, however, now seemed furnished by the opening passage of the memorandum, which said that His Majesty's Government are prepared to accept the arrangement reached at the conference held at the Foreign Office on the 30th September upon the understanding that it is to be treated solely as providing for the situation caused by the recent advances of General Allenby's force into Syria, and is to be deemed to refer only to the territories occupied, or to be occupied, by that force; and, second, by the statement that the agreement of 1916 was, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government, out of date. In the circumstances, therefore, Lord Curzon was prepared to recommend the War Cabinet to endorse the memorandum.

The War Cabinet decided—

To approve the terms of Lord Robert Cecil’s memorandum of 8th October, 1918.

10. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (G.T.-5864) recommending a reduction in the forces retained for home defence.

The War Cabinet approved the recommendations contained in this memorandum.

11. The Chancellor of the Exchequer stated that he would ask for an early Cabinet decision on the attitude to be taken up by the Government with regard to a Bill for enabling women to sit in Parliament.

It was decided that—

The matter should be placed upon the agenda at the next meeting.

Lord Robert Cecil expressed the hope that the Government would press on with the Imports Restriction Bill, which had already been introduced.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer stated that he felt this would be impossible unless something was said about the Government’s economic policy.

Mr. Chamberlain stated that he hoped that the War Cabinet would hold an early discussion upon the subject of future economic policy.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W., October 14, 1918.
APPENDIX.

G.T.-5955.

FUTURE GOVERNMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

Copy of Letter from Lord R. Cecil to M. Pichon covering a Draft Memorandum.

Dear M. Pichon,

In reference to the Affairs of Syria of which you spoke to me to-day, I have great pleasure in sending you the annexed memorandum, to which the Prime Minister agrees. It has not yet been approved by the Cabinet, and until that has taken place it must be treated as to that extent provisional.

Yours very sincerely,

(Initialled) P. C.

Draft Memorandum.

British Embassy, Paris, October 8, 1918.

His Majesty's Government are prepared to accept the arrangement reached at the Conference held at the Foreign Office on the 30th September, upon the understanding that it is to be treated solely as providing for the situation caused by the recent advance of General Allenby's force into Syria, and is to be deemed to refer only to the territories occupied, or to be occupied, by that force.

With regard to the future government of the other territories mentioned in the Anglo-French Convention of 1916, His Majesty's Government think it right to point out that the general position has so much changed since that Agreement was entered into that its provisions did not in all respects appear suitable to present conditions. Not only has the military position in Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Syria completely altered, but two political changes of vast importance have taken place. The United States have come into the war, and Russia has gone out. It is manifest on the one hand that America cannot be ignored in any settlement of the future of these countries, and particularly of Syria and Palestine. And on the other, the arrangements contemplated for the north-eastern part of Armenia have been completely upset by the collapse of Russia. A further difficulty is caused by clause 9 of the Treaty of London, which recognises the claims of Italy in connection with the Eastern Mediterranean. The provisional suggestions made at Saint Jean de Maurienne for meeting these claims have lapsed, and, indeed, would in any case be difficult now to enforce without protests from Greece, and even from Turkey. While calling attention to these points, His Majesty's Government feel that it would be useless to attempt a settlement of them at the present moment, and they suggest that they should form the subject of fresh conversations, in which the Governments of Italy and the United States as well as the French and British Governments should be invited to take part.

(Signed) ROBERT CECIL.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 12, 1918.