Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on
Friday, October 18, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:

The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, M.P. (in the Chair).


The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.

The Right Hon. A. Chamberlain, M.P.

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

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. Lord R. Cecil, K.C., M.P., Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 4 to end).

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. the 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 10).

Rear-Admiral G. P. W. Hope, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord (for Minutes 1 to 8).


The Right Hon. E. S. Montagu, M.P., Secretary of State for India (for Minutes 10 to end).

The Right Hon. C. Addison, M.D., M.P., Minister of Reconstruction (for Minutes 9 to end).

The Right Hon. Sir J. Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minutes 10 to 11).

Major-General E. B. Ashmore, C.M.G., M.V.O., Home Forces (for Minute 9).

Brigadier-General R. M. Groves, D.S.O., Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (for Minute 9).

Major J. L. Baird, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Air Ministry (for Minute 9).


Captain L. F. Burgis, Assistant Secretary.

Major the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Correction of Minutes.

1. WITH reference to War Cabinet 488, Minutes 1 and 2, the War Cabinet decided that—

The record in draft Minutes 1 and 2 of War Cabinet 488, of a discussion on preparations for an eventual Peace Conference, should be abbreviated and incorporated in a single minute, since the discussion had been of a preliminary character and did not lend itself to precise and accurate record.

Post-War disposal of Surplus Government Property.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 488, Minute 1, the War Cabinet decided that—

The name of Sir Albert Stanley should be added to the Committee, and that full Cabinet authority should be given to Mr. Chamberlain to decide upon the recommendations of the Committee without further reference.

The Western Front.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the Germans were falling back from the Belgian coast to the line of the river Lys. This involved the occupation of Bruges by Allied forces. He explained, with reference to a map, the strategical conception of the plans of operation now being put into execution by the British army. General Wilson said that the best German divisions had been brought both from the north and south of the line to resist Rawlinson's attacks. Very heavy fighting had taken place on the previous day, and was continuing.

Trans-Caspia.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that, from telegrams received from General Malleson, it appeared that our forces had received a check in the neighbourhood of Kaakha.

Lord Curzon said that our main object in this theatre had been achieved, namely, the prevention of a Turkish or German advance across the Caspian. Any fighting in Trans-Caspia was now of purely local significance.

Russia.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff drew the attention of the Cabinet to a telegram which had been received from Archangel (No. E. 672/G), dated the 17th October, stating that the French infantry battalion at Archangel had been seriously affected by the possibility of an armistice on the Western front. The Americans had informed our Commander that, in the case of an armistice, they would not fight offensively. This raised the whole question as to our future military policy in Russia in the event of an armistice with the Central Empires.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that, in the event of an armistice with Germany, we were faced with a serious state of things in Russia. The main justification of our intervention had been to prevent German aggression and absorption of that country. Mr. Balfour drew attention to Joint Note No. 38 of the Military Representatives at Versailles, and said that President Wilson had always taken a very strong line, that he was unwilling to participate in the re-constitution of the Eastern front, and that Russia must be permitted to work out her own salvation without interference. He had only consented to intervention in Siberia in order to enable the Czecho-Slovaks to get out of Russia through Vladivostok. If we now withdrew our forces from European and Asiatic Russia we should suffer a serious loss of prestige, and should be letting down our friends. The American Military Representative at Versailles had taken up a very definite attitude in regard to American participation in Russia, and had made it quite clear that the United States of America would have nothing to do with it.
Mr. Chamberlain stated that, in view of the American attitude, it was most urgent that we should have a military and diplomatic exchange of views with the French regarding our future policy in Russia in the event of an armistice. The French took the view that their old relations with Russia and their interests in that country gave them special rights and privileges. It now appeared that the French Battalion at Archangel would not fight in the event of an armistice with Germany. It was therefore necessary that the French Government should be approached with a view to arriving at a common decision in regard to future policy.

General Smuts said that, before the Allies could have an armistice with the Central Powers, they must be clear about political and military questions in Russia. Bolshevism was a danger to the whole world, and we were already committed at Murmansk, Archangel, and in Siberia.

Lord Robert Cecil said that there were two big Russian questions which demanded immediate consideration:

1. The question of the small Baltic States which had been created by Germany as the result of the Peace of Brest-Litovsk.
2. The question of intervention in Russia.

He hated the idea of abandoning to Bolshevik fury all those who had helped us, but he quite saw that it might end badly if we tried to destroy Bolshevism by means of military interference. He pointed out that Japan was also concerned, as well as France. He thought that nothing was to be gained by consulting France until the British Government had agreed upon its policy. In view of the possibility of a British fleet entering the Black Sea, it was important that we should know what was the present position of General Alexieff's forces in Cis-Caucasia.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer thought that it would help the Cabinet to come to a conclusion if a joint memorandum by the Foreign Office, the War Office, and the Admiralty could be drawn up regarding the present position and our future policy in Russia.

Mr. Chamberlain hoped that such a memorandum would contain definite propositions for the Cabinet to accept or reject.

The War Cabinet decided that—

(a) The Foreign Office should send a telegram to Lord Derby, asking him to draw the attention of M. Clemenceau to the attitude taken up by the French battalion at Archangel, and requesting him to take steps to deal with the situation;

(b) The Foreign Office, in consultation with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the First Sea Lord, should prepare a Paper on the subject of our present and future military policy in Russia.

Ostend, 6. With reference to War Cabinet 488, Minute 4, the Deputy First Sea Lord reported that the Vice-Admiral, Dover, had landed at Ostend at 1:30 P.M. on the 17th October. The town was found to be evacuated by the Germans, but an 11-inch shell had fallen in the town shortly after the Admiral had landed. A Flushing telegram reported that all the buildings on the Belgian coast between Ostend and the Dutch frontier were on fire, and a series of explosions had been heard.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that such fires could be of no military advantage, and that, if the report were true, the action of the Germans was mere vandalism.
7. Admiral Hope stated that there had been no diminution of submarine attacks during the last few days, and there was no sign of a practical response in this respect to President Wilson’s note.

An enemy submarine had been attacked near Hartlepool with success. 18 depth charges had been exploded, and the results seemed to point to the submarine having been destroyed.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 483, Minute 5, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a draft telegram congratulating the King of the Belgians on the success of the Allied forces acting under his command.

The War Cabinet decided, subject to the approval of the Prime Minister, that—

The Foreign Office should send this telegram to the King of the Belgians through the Belgian Government.

9. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Paper G.T.-5999), covering a letter from the Air Ministry, with regard to the anti-aircraft defence of the United Kingdom.

General Ashmore said that he would like the War Cabinet to understand that, after the additional three squadrons referred to in the memorandum had been sent to France, the establishment for London Air Defences would be short to the extent of forty machines. He said that the third squadron could be prepared shortly, and that the two additional squadrons, mentioned in the memorandum, could be formed at intervals of two months. This could be done without further reducing the strength of the London Air Defences. He also pointed out, with regard to the possibility of air raids being made again on this country, that there was no physical reason why such attacks should not take place, even if the enemy were forced to retreat beyond Ghent. General Ashmore strongly pressed that the ten balloon aprons should be retained. He pointed out that they had an important influence in restricting the enemy machines to high altitudes, where they could be dealt with by our aircraft. Further, the number of “A” or “B1” men that would be set free by their reduction was limited.

General Smuts concurred with General Ashmore.

The War Cabinet approved of the proposals contained in the Memorandum, except for the proposals in regard to balloon aprons, which it was decided to retain.

10. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Secretary of State for War (Paper G.T.-5871) in regard to the disposal of surplus animals on demobilisation.

In the memorandum reference was made to a pledge given by Mr. Lloyd George, when Secretary of State for War, on the 12th October, 1918, on the subject of selling old war horses to the Easterns.

The War Cabinet asked—

The Secretary of State for War to decide this question in the best way possible, and to submit his decision for the Prime Minister’s approval, in view of the pledge referred to above.
11. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Food Controller (Paper G.T.-5985) in regard to the importation of onions from Spain.

In the Memorandum it was stated that, owing to the comparative failure of this year's home onion crop, the small Spanish crop, and the insuperable difficulties in the way of securing sufficient tonnage to import other foreign onion crops, it had become necessary to control the prices of both home-grown and imported onions.

The Treasury desired to see private purchases stopped, in view of their effect upon the exchange, and the sanction of the War Cabinet was accordingly asked to the prohibition of the import of onions except under licence.

The War Cabinet approved of the proposals contained in the Food Controller's Memorandum.

12. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Paper G.T.-5909) in regard to raw materials.

In the Memorandum a proposal was made that a Committee of Ministers should be appointed to consider, with the Departments directly concerned with the supply, during the war, of each of the raw materials referred to in the resolutions of the Imperial War Conference, what action was necessary to provide that the necessary supplies should, in fact, be available for the United Kingdom after the war, and arrange with those Departments for such administrative action, beyond what had already taken place, as was necessary to secure such supplies.

A letter was read from the President of the Board of Trade, who was unavoidably prevented from attending, in which he expressed the view that the matter should be referred to the Economic Defence and Development Committee for decision.

It was pointed out, however, that Mr. Long's proposals were strictly in accordance with the procedure outlined in War Cabinet 429, Minute 15, for the Trade Relation Committee and the Economic Defence and Development Committee. Also, in view of the fact that Mr. Chamberlain had consented to become a member of the new Committee, the co-ordination between the two bodies would be complete.

In these circumstances,

The War Cabinet approved the proposals contained in Mr. Long's memorandum.

13. With reference to War Cabinet 320, Minute 13, the War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Paper G.T.-5989) in which he requested the approval of the War Cabinet to the Financial Secretary of the Treasury being added to the Committee of Ministers appointed to examine the question of unemployment due to the closing down of industries and restriction of raw materials.

The War Cabinet approved of Mr. Bonar Law's proposal.
National Day of Prayer.

14. The War Cabinet had before them a telegram from the Governor-General of New Zealand to the Colonial Office (Paper G.T.-5379), in which he asked whether the first Sunday in the New Year, or any other date, was to be observed as a National Day of Prayer?

The War Cabinet postponed the settlement of this question to a more opportune moment.

Indian Reforms.

15. The Secretary of State for India stated that a debate would take place in the House of Lords next Wednesday on the subject of Indian reforms. Unless he had the views of the War Cabinet, Mr. Montagu said it would be very difficult for him to instruct Lord Islington as to the line he should take.

The War Cabinet decided—

The Secretary to place the question on the Agenda Paper for next Tuesday, 22nd October, 1918.

(Initialled) A. B. L.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 18, 1918.