War Cabinet, 430.

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, October 24, 1918, at 11:30 A.M.

Present:

The Prime Minister (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. the Earl Curzon of Kedleston, K.C.G.S.I., G.C.I.E.
The Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P.
The Right Hon. A. Bonar Law, 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. A. J. Balfour, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 1–6).
The Right Hon. the Lord R. Cecil, K.C., M.P., Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (for Minutes 6 and 7).
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. Sir J. Maclay, Bart., Shipping Controller (for Minute 7).
The Right Hon. W. S. Churchill, M.P., Minister of Munitions (for Minute 7).

The Right Hon. Sir A. 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).

SIR D. J. Shackleton, K.C.B., Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour (for Minute 7).

SIR G. Calhefop, Bart., Coal Controller (for Minute 7).

SIR A. Nimmo, Coal Controller’s Department (for Minute 7).

Captain Clement Jones, Assistant Secretary.
Major the Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Assistant Secretary.
Lieutenant-Colonel L. Wilson, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., Assistant Secretary.
The War Cabinet had before them a telegram from Mr. Barclay, Washington (No. 4788), dated the 23rd October, 1918, giving President Wilson's reply to the last Note from the German Government regarding peace and armistice (Appendix).

The Prime Minister stated that he welcomed the terms of the reply, and liked the tenor of President Wilson's proposals. If Germany meant peace she would accept, and the acceptance would be equivalent to military surrender. If, on the other hand, the Germans want to continue the war, they would now be compelled to continue the war upon a refusal to accept the armistice terms proposed by the Allies jointly. He was most anxious to avoid a breakdown of the negotiations on the diplomatic platform. He wished to see the matter placed in the hands of Marshal Foch and the Allied Commanders-in-Chief. If a breakdown occurred under such circumstances, there would be no break in public opinion or in the Army, as it would be clear that the breakdown was due not to the action of political and diplomatic chiefs, but to the refusal by the German military authorities of the terms of armistice required by the military chiefs. The diplomatic wrangle was now over, and the President had made it clear that the terms of the armistice would be such as to prevent the resumption of hostilities by the Germans.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer pointed out that the President had telegraphed through Sir Eric Geddes that he (eared that the Allies would impose humiliating terms in the armistice. Now, however, the President had himself put forward demands which were humiliating, and practically amounted to unconditional surrender.

In regard to the actual terms, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff thought that we could give to the Germans the same terms as were given by the Germans to the French garrison in Belfort in 1870, namely, the honours of war.

Lord Reading stated that the President had now done what the War Cabinet had wished him to do. The moment had now arrived when President Wilson had stated that he would communicate with the Allied Governments, and he had made it clear to the German Government that the terms of armistice would be such as would prevent the Germans resuming hostilities.

Mr. Chamberlain drew attention to the concluding passage in the President's reply, which seemed to suggest that he would require, as a first condition, the imposition of further changes in the German Constitution. He reminded the Cabinet that nothing embittered French opinion more than the interference by Germany in French internal politics between 1870 and the outbreak of the present war, notably the demand for the dismissal of M. Delcassé.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that he was apprehensive lest the Note would be construed as meaning that the President demanded unconditional surrender if he were dealing with the Hohenzollerns, but that if he were dealing with a Constitutional régime the Allies were prepared to grant easier terms.

The Prime Minister thought that apprehension need not be felt upon this point, as, in the first part of his Note, the President had made it clear that, even in dealing with a Constitutional régime in Germany, the terms of the armistice would be such as would amount in practice to military surrender.

Mr. Chamberlain pointed out that there was no question of different armistice terms, but a distinction was drawn in regard to the ultimate peace terms.

Mr. Balfour stated that the inherent power in the German Constitution still remained with the Council of Empire ("Bundesrat"), which had not yet been touched.

Mr. Chamberlain pointed out that the sole value of a democratic Constitution in this connection lay in the fact that no country with a democratic Constitution could prepare and scheme for war through a long series of years, but that a democratic Constitution was no
guarantee that a Parliament or Government would not suddenly declare war. Mr. Chamberlain drew attention to a telegram from Lord Derby (No 1299), dated the 23rd October, 1918, dealing with the armistice proposals, and said that he presumed that the use of the word "military" by the French Government meant "naval and military." He was very anxious that there should be no misunderstanding on this point.

Further discussion on this subject was adjourned until the receipt of President Wilson's official communication to the Allied Governments.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the IIrd and IVth Armies had captured over 8,000 prisoners and 100 guns on the previous day. The 1st Army, under General Horne, had joined in the attack that morning, and reports showed that everything was going very well. In front of the IVth Corps the Germans had run away. In answer to Mr. Chamberlain, who asked whether it was true that 30 German divisions were now opposed to the American divisions in the Meuse district, General Wilson stated that we had identified at least 27, but that one of these German divisions had a total bayonet strength of 785. This was one of the most remarkable pieces of evidence we had regarding the decline in strength of the German armies.

3. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the Italian offensive had begun. Two armies, namely, the IVth and XIth, had attacked on the previous night, and two more armies, namely, the VIIIth and Xth—the latter of which was under the command of General Cavan—were to attack to-night. In all, 36 divisions and 5,000 guns were being engaged in this attack. The weather was fine, and the Piave was falling. Important results might be expected if the attack was successful.

4. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that our advance up the Tigris had now reached the neighbourhood of Kirkuk, without encountering any opposition. We were, however, still about 130 miles from Mosul.

5. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that he had seen General Shea, who had just returned from Palestine, where he had commanded a division. He had said that there was now nothing in front of General Allenby to prevent him reaching Aleppo and Alexandretta. General Shea had stated that the Turks had cut the throats of the Germans in Damascus, and that the only Germans who escaped were those who had surrendered to the British.

Mr. Balfour recalled that he had seen a report that a train containing Turkish, German, and Austrian officers, proceeding from Aleppo to Constantinople, had been stopped by the Turks, and that the Turks had taken out the German officers, stripped them, and flogged them, but had spared the Austrian officers on the ground that the latter were in the same boat as the Turks and were their fellow-victims.

Mr. Chamberlain thought that such information should be given wide publication, especially by wireless, in order to show the Germans how they were now hated by their Allies.

The War Cabinet requested—

The Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to arrange for the publication of such information in this country, and
6. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Lawrence had informed him that there were difficulties in regard to the employment of Australian divisions in the present fighting. The Australians had been pulled out of the line for a rest, and Mr. Hughes had given them to understand that they had been pulled out for a long rest. The Commander-in-Chief wished to put them into the line again at once, and General Lawrence feared that if this were done there might be trouble among them. On the other hand, if the Australians were not put in, there would be trouble with our troops. The Australian divisions had had more rest than the British troops.

Mr. Long thought that the facts should be brought to the attention of the Australian Ministers now in this country, and to the General in Command of the Australian base in England.

The Secretary pointed out that Mr. Hughes had been asked to attend this Meeting of the War Cabinet, but was away speaking in the provinces.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Secretary of State for the Colonies should keep in touch with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on the subject, and, if General Sir H. Wilson could not reach a satisfactory arrangement after seeing General Monash, Mr. Long should use his discretion in asking Mr. Hughes to return at once to London.

7. The President of the Board of Trade said that a demand had been made by the Miners Federation of South Wales for a shorter working day for surface workers in the mines in South Wales. At the present moment the men working below ground worked an 8-hours day, but the men above ground worked an 11-hours day with an interval of 1½ hours for meals. The South Wales Miners' Federation was demanding an 8½-hours working day for surface workers, while the Hopkins' Union was asking for an 8-hours day. The colliery owners in South Wales had been consulted and had refused to agree to this change, pointing out that it was in violation of the agreement arrived at, which provided for no change in working hours during the War except by mutual consent. The Coal Controller had held meetings with the miners' representatives, who had told him that this demand must be met, as they would otherwise be unable to control the men, and that the men would go on strike. A Conference was being held in South Wales that day, and Sir Guy Calthrop had asked the representatives of the miners to take no definite step at this meeting, to which they had agreed, and he proposed to go there himself on the following day and meet the Conference. Sir Albert Stanley pointed out that the Miners' Federation of South Wales had asked the British Miners' Federation to raise this question, but they had refused, and left it to each district to put the demand forward if they thought fit to do so. There were constant demands of a similar nature being put forward by other districts, in Scotland as well as in England. This demand, if acceded to, would not only mean a reduced output of coal, but must undoubtedly spread to other industries. A similar position had arisen a year ago with reference to a section of the railwaymen, who had demanded an 8-hours day, and on that occasion the War Cabinet refused to agree and had proclaimed the strike, but a promise was given at that time that sympathetic consideration with regard to shortening the working hours would be given after the
cessation of hostilities. Sir Albert Stanley was hopeful that it would be possible to come to some arrangement on similar lines, and suggested that the Coal Controller should endeavour to induce the miners to refer the whole question to the British Miners' Federation, and that the War Cabinet should authorise Sir Guy Calthrop to give a pledge on behalf of the Government that within six months from the conclusion of peace it would undertake to bring about such a reduction and re-arrangement of the hours of surface workers at collieries as would ensure that their normal shift should not exceed 8\frac{1}{2} hours, including 20 minutes for mealtime. Sir Albert Stanley expressed the opinion that it was very advisable that this pledge should be given by the Government. The position was undoubtedly serious, but he was hopeful that a settlement would be arrived at on these terms.

In reply to questions, the Coal Controller said that he had interviewed the Chairman of the Miners' Federation of South Wales, who had told him that the men were quite out of hand and that the Federation had to decide whether or not to support the strike. It was quite clear that the intention of the men was not so much to cut down the amount of coal mined, but to increase overtime pay. Sir Guy Calthrop expressed the opinion that the President of the British Miners' Federation would be willing to accept the proposal indicated by Sir Albert Stanley, as, by doing so, the whole question would come within the control of the Federation of Great Britain, and he would be able to deal with it in accordance with the pledge which he had given to the Prime Minister. If the question were referred to the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, it would be impossible for any strike to take place for a fortnight, as a conference of all the coalfields must be called, and, if this offer were made, the arguments in favour of a strike would be greatly weakened.

Sir Adam Nimmo agreed that the chances of a strike were remote if this proposal were adopted. In the first place, the policy involved in the whole question would be centralised, which would be a decided advantage to the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, and, in the second place, a definite pledge would have to be given by the Government that an 8\frac{1}{2}-hours day had practically been conceded, and this would be a great advantage from the point of view of the Federation. Moreover, Mr. Smillie had already, in another case recently dealt with, stated openly that, if the demands in respect of wages in that case were met, the difficulty of hours might be got over, as he recognised that during the War the difficulties of readjusting hours were great, and that there was reasonable ground for postponing this question until after the War. It would serve no useful purpose only to say, as had been said in the case of the railway workers, that sympathetic consideration was involved concession.

With regard to the colliery owners, while they were not likely to be unanimous in accepting this proposal, there was a general recognition of the fact that hours of surface workers at the collieries would require to be considered immediately after the War, and Sir Adam Nimmo's view was that this pledge by the Government would not carry the industry further than many coal owners believed they would require to go after the War.

In reply to a question as to what the effect of a strike at the present time would be, the Fourth Sea Lord said that the Navy had sufficient coal in reserve to carry on for about fourteen days.

The Shipping Controller pointed out that mercantile shipping would be stopped at once.

The Minister of Munitions said that, although his Department...
had no reserves of coal, there would be no difference in the supply of munitions to the Army for a considerable time.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The President of the Board of Trade should be authorised to make the following pledge on behalf of the Government:

The Government undertakes to bring about within six months from the conclusion of Peace, such a reduction and re-arrangement of the hours of surface workers at collieries as will ensure that their normal shift shall not exceed 8 hours 30 minutes, including 20 minutes for mealtime, with the necessary elasticity to meet emergencies and other essential work in the spirit of the Coal Mines Regulation Act, 1901, provided the hours of persons at present working less than the normal shift as defined above shall not be interfered with.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
24th October, 1918.
APPENDIX.

Mr. C. Barclay to Mr. Balfour.—(Received October 24.)

En clair. Washington, October 23, 1918.

FOLLOWING is reply of United States Government to German note:—

"Having received solemn and explicit assurance of German Government that it unreservedly accepts terms of peace laid down in his address to Congress of United States on 8th January, 1918, and principles of settlement enunciated in his subsequent addresses, particularly address of 27th September, and that it desires to discuss details of their application, and that this wish and purpose emanate, not from those who have hitherto dictated German policy and conducted present war on Germany's behalf, but from Ministers who speak for majority of Reichstag and for an overwhelming majority of German people, and having received also explicit promise of present German Government that humane rules of civilized warfare will be observed both on land and sea by German armed forces, President of United States feels he cannot decline to take up with Governments with which United States is associated question of armistice. He deems it his duty to say again, however, only armistice he would feel justified in submitting for consideration would be one which should leave United States and Powers associated with her in position to enforce any arrangements that may be entered into, and to make renewal of hostilities on part of Germany impossible. President has therefore transmitted his correspondence with present German authorities to Governments with which United States Government is associated as belligerent, with suggestion that, if those Governments are disposed to effect peace upon terms and principles indicated, their military advisers and military advisers of United States be asked to submit to Governments associated against Germany necessary terms of such an armistice as will fully protect interests of peoples involved, and ensure to Associated Governments unrestricted power to safeguard and enforce details of peace to which German Government has agreed, provided they deem such armistice possible from military point of view. Should such terms of armistice be suggested, their acceptance by Germany will afford best concrete evidence of her unequivocal acceptance of terms and principles of peace from which whole action proceeds. President would deem himself lacking in candour did he not point out in frankest possible terms reason why extraordinary safeguards must be demanded. Significant and important as constitutional changes seem to be, which are spoken of by German Foreign Secretary in note of 20th October, it does not appear that principle of Government responsible to German people has yet been fully worked out or that any guarantees either exist or are in contemplation that alterations of principle and practice now partially agreed upon will be permanent. Moreover, it does not appear that heart of present difficulty has been reached. It may be that future wars have been brought under control of German people, but present war has not, and it is with present war that we are dealing. It is evident German people have no means of commanding acquiescence of military authorities of Empire in popular will; that power of King of Prussia to control policy of Empire is unimpaired; that determining initiative still remains with those who have hitherto been masters of Germany. Feeling that whole peace of world depends now on plain speaking and straightforward action, President deems it his duty to say, without any attempt to soften what may seem harsh words, that nations of world do not, and cannot, trust word of those who have hitherto been masters of German policy, and to point out once more that, in concluding peace and attempting to undo infinite injuries and injustices of this war, United States Government cannot deal with any but veritable representatives of German people, who have been assured of genuine constitutional standing as real rulers of Germany. If it must deal with military masters and monarchical autocrats of Germany now, or if it is likely to have to deal with them later in regard to international obligations of German Empire, it must demand not peace negotiations, but surrender. Nothing can be gained by leaving this essential thing unsaid."