Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Wednesday, October 30, 1918, at 12 noon.

Present:


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.

Major-General W. THWAITES, C.B., Director of Military Intelligence (for Minutes 1 to 7).

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

The Italian Front.

1. THE Director of Military Intelligence reported that a local counter-attack against the British, south of Valenciennes, had been repulsed. The French had attacked north of the Aisne on a two-divisional front, and had captured about 800 prisoners. The Director of Military Intelligence said that another Austrian division had been identified on the Italian front which was thought to be on the Western front. This left three Austrian divisions in France, and possible two more.

2. The Director of Military Intelligence read to the War Cabinet the following wireless message which had been received that morning by the Supreme Command of the Italian Army:

"If the evacuation of Venetia is carried out under the pressure of the Italian Army, i.e., in the course of continuous fighting and battles, destruction and severe damage would be inevitable to the villages, bridges, and railways, &c. If, on the other hand, hostilities were to be suspended, the evacuation of the well-cultivated plain, with its rich crops, would take place without any damage whatever to the country. For these reasons the Supreme Command desires to bring about an immediate suspension of hostilities.—(Signed) CARL, Imperator et Rex."
The Director of Military Intelligence said that the gaps, reported in yesterday's minutes, between the Xth and XIIth Armies, had been filled up by the operations of the XVIIIth Corps. The battle now extended to a front of 30 miles, and the Allies had penetrated to a depth of 8 miles. Heavy fighting was taking place in the Grappa district, where the best Austrian troops were opposing the advance. On the remainder of the front the Austrians were retiring without fighting. The total captures to date were 17,000 prisoners and 150 guns. The Director of Military Intelligence said that General Diaz had expressed great confidence in the Xth Army, under the command of Lord Cavan. The British XIVth Corps had done splendidly.

3. The Director of Military Intelligence reported that the 22nd Division had landed at Dedeagatch on Monday last. In answer to a question, the Director of Military Intelligence said that this division was the right of three columns advancing on Constantine. He was of opinion that the first engagement with the Turks might take place on the Maritza River, on the left bank of which the Turkish advanced troops had arrived.

Attention was drawn to War Office telegram No. 69689, dated the 29th October, 1918, in which instructions were given to General Milne to send a British battalion to Scutari.

The Director of Military Intelligence said he thought that some troops were being despatched. General Franchet d'Esperey was disinclined to allow Italian troops to go north of the Drin River, but had invited their co-operation at Scutari.

The Deputy First Sea Lord said that the Admiralty had consented to two officers and forty Royal Marines proceeding to Scutari until the British battalion arrived.

The Director of Military Intelligence said that between Nish and Belgrade there were about three German and two and a half Austrian divisions, the latter probably fighting under German supervision. The Serbians were about 50 miles from Belgrade at the moment.

4. The Director of Military Intelligence said that information had been received with regard to General Kress, the commander of the German forces in the Caucasus. General Kress had instructions that, in the event of the probable evacuation of the Caucasus, he was to retain at Tiflis a bodyguard of 500 men. The Director of Military Intelligence said that at the present moment there were four Turkish divisions in the Caucasus, and elements of other divisions. The Turkish divisions in that region were about 3,000 rifles strong.

5. Lord Curzon asked the Director of Military Intelligence whether he could give the Cabinet any information with regard to the position of the various Allied forces in Russia.

The Director of Military Intelligence said that, as regards Archangel, General Poole would have to remain inactive during the winter, owing to weather conditions. There was no communication between the forces at Archangel and the Czechs on the Volga. As regards the Czecho-Slovaks, they had had to give ground on the Volga, and were considering a retirement on the Urals, where they would endeavour to hold the passes. This force was in a precarious position as regards food, arms, and equipment, owing to the fact that the Allies were not helping them. As the Cabinet were aware, the United States had not allowed any of their troops to leave the neighbourhood of Vladivostock, and the Japanese were disinclined to move their forces west of Lake Baikal.
a composite French, British, and Italian force, about 2,000 to 3,000
strong, which was not far east of Omsk. This latter force was the
only one that appeared to be trying to render any assistance to the
Czecho-Slovaks.

Lord Robert Cecil then raised the question of the training of
the Russian forces in Siberia and the position of General Knox. He
recalled the fact that General Knox had been given permission to
train 3,000 Russians, on the understanding that when the French
arrived at Vladivostock he might have to hand over to them the
training of those forces. The French had now issued instructions
that no one was to train the Russians but themselves. This left
General Knox with little to do in Siberia, and a suggestion had
been made that we should withdraw General Knox and all the
supplies which we had proposed to send for the use of the Russians.
Lord Robert Cecil hesitated to agree with this suggestion. The
French might raise no objection to our withdrawal. This would
result in a complete breakdown, and the whole movement of re­
organising the Russian forces would be compromised. He suggested
that the War Office should send an officer with complete infor­
mation to Lord Milner, in Paris, with a view of the latter taking
up the question with the French, so as to arrive at a working
arrangement.

This proposal met with the approval of the War Cabinet, but
at a later stage in the meeting a message was received from the
War Office that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, before he had
proceeded to France, had made himself acquainted with the whole
position in Siberia; and he was going to raise the question with the
French while he was in Paris.

In these circumstances the War Cabinet decided that—

A reminder should be sent by the Director of Military Intelli­
ga the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, informing
him that the War Cabinet had discussed the situation that
morning, and requesting him not to fail to come to some
arrangement with the French Government on the subject.

6. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that an enemy sub­
marine had attempted to enter Scapa on the night of the 28th
instant, and was blown up on the detector minefield. Divers had
located the wreck. This was the first attempt of an enemy
submarine to enter Scapa.

7. The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that a report had been
received from the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, on 22nd
October, that British invalid prisoners, women and children, to a
total number of 1,000, were in or near Smyrna; that deaths were
occurring daily among the invalid prisoners; and that the Turkish
authorities were willing for a British vessel to remove them at once,
without waiting for the arrival of the Turkish prisoners to be
repatriated under the agreement, who were not due until the
15th November. The Admiralty had therefore arranged for the
hospital ship "Kanowna" to proceed to Smyrna at once to embark
them. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, had been instructed
to endeavour to arrange for the balance (apparently about 200) of
the 1,000 British combatant invalids to be transferred under the
agreement to be embarked in the steam-ship "Empire," which
would take the Turkish prisoners to be repatriated.
8. Reference was made to the large number of problems arising out of this important subject, and to the possibility of dealing with some of them by meetings of representatives of the Ministries concerned, without the necessity of bringing them before the War Cabinet. It was pointed out that the War Office Scheme of Demobilisation was well advanced, but that the Labour scheme had not reached the same level.

With reference to War Cabinet 492, Minute 16, it was proposed that three members of the War Cabinet should meet, with the authority and powers of the War Cabinet, to dispose of demobilisation questions, and it was decided that—

General Smuts, Mr. Chamberlain, and Mr. Barnes should meet for this purpose.

9. Mr. Barnes reported to the War Cabinet the result of a Conference held that morning on the position amongst the aircraft woodworkers at Aintree and other places. The Conference had decided that, if the men failed to return to work within three days, their protection from recruitment should automatically lapse, and that an injunction should be sought from the High Court to restrain the Trade Union from threatening to expel members who have continued to work on the system of payment by results.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
October 30, 1918.