CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, November 21, 1939, at 11-30 A.M.

Present:

The Right Hon. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).


The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., First Lord of the Admiralty.

The Right Hon. L. HORE-BELISHA, M.P., Secretary of State for War.

The Right Hon. LORO CHATFIELD, M.P., Minister for Co-Ordination of Defence.

The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.

The Right Hon. OLIVER STANLEY, M.P., Secretary of State for Home Security.

The Right Hon. JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Secretary of State for Home Department and Minister of Home Security.

The Right Hon. OLIVER STANLEY, M.P., President of the Board of Trade (Item 8).


The Hon. Sir A. CADOGAN, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office (Items 5-12).

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley POUNDER, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff (Items 1 and 2).

The following were also present:

Admiral of the Fleet the Right Hon. LORD CHATFIELD, Minister for Co-Ordination of Defence.

The Right Hon. L. HORE-BELISHA, M.P., Secretary of State for War.

The Right Hon. Sir SAMUEL HOARE, Bt., M.P., Lord Privy Seal.

The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY, Minister without Portfolio.

Mr. R. H. CROSS, M.P., Minister for Economic Warfare (Item 8).

Sir HORACE J. WILSON, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury.

Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff (Items 1-7).

General Sir W. EDWARD IRONSIDE, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Items 1-7).

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD HUGHES.
Major-General H. E. Ismay.

J. W. B. TAYLOR.
Lieutenant-Colonel V. DAVIS, R.E.

Lieutenant-Colonel W. FOWLER, R.E.

Mr. G. N. PARKER.
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1. The Secretary of State for Air said that there had been two raids by single German aircraft the previous day between noon and 1-30. One aircraft, flying at a height between 20,000 and 22,000 feet, crossed the coast at Brighton, passed over London and flew out down the Thames. A second raid had been identified off Clacton, but did not cross the coast. Anti-aircraft guns had been in action in the Thames Estuary and at Dover. Both the aircraft had been intercepted by fighter patrols, and some hits were observed though neither had been brought down.

In the evening between 6-30 and 9-0 p.m. a number of enemy aircraft were active off the East Coast from Felixstowe to Margate. They had not been intercepted. An analysis was made of the areas in which they appeared to be operating, and the Admiralty had been immediately informed in view of the possibility that they might have been engaged in mine-laying from the air.

H.M.S. Boudicca had been attacked 60 miles east of Cromer the previous morning; one bomb was dropped near her.

One enemy aircraft flew over Scapa during the morning. It was engaged without result by anti-aircraft fire.

A propaganda raid over Hamburg and Bremen had been carried out the previous evening. Slight anti-aircraft fire had been encountered. Both aircraft concerned had returned.

A sweep over an area in the North Sea had been carried out the previous afternoon by bombers, but no suitable objectives had been found.

A Heinkel 111, which was carrying out a reconnaissance made at a regular hour each day in the Dover area, had been intercepted and shot down that morning.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

2. The First Lord of the Admiralty reported the forthcoming movements of the Fleet, and the action being taken to combat the German mine-laying. The Admiralty doubted whether mines could be laid from aircraft, though such an operation would be possible if parachutes were used. As an immediate measure it had been decided to try the effect of abandoning convoy on the East Coast and allowing ships to sail independently. All navigational lights would be extinguished so that U-boats would have no leading marks by which to lay mines at night. Shipping would, of course, have to anchor during the hours of darkness. It was believed that the delays involved in anchoring at night would be less than the time saved in not having to wait for convoys, and that the net result would be to improve the turn round of shipping. The abandonment of convoy would release light craft for anti-submarine operations.

Some discussion took place on this proposal. It was pointed out that if deliberate air attacks on shipping were started by the enemy, it would be very difficult for the Royal Air Force to give any protection to ships sailing independently. If as a result, heavy air attack was concentrated on our shipping on the East Coast, the plan would have to be reviewed.

The First Lord of the Admiralty informed the War Cabinet that there had not been reported that H.M.S. Belfast had been struck either by a mine or torpedo in the Firth of Forth. She was reported to be making her way to Harwich under her own steam.

The mine-sweeper Messy had been blown up while sweeping in the Thames the previous day. Steamship Aragon Castle, loaded with coal, had been sunk on the 16th November 100 miles north-east of Ulban.

It was reported in Canada that the ship's crew of Clan Ogilvy had been released from internment, probably by a rather
3. The Secretary of State for War said that there had been an increase of German divisions in the forward area between Luxemburg and Basle, the biggest increase being opposite Luxemburg.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that no definite deduction could be drawn from these moves, which had taken place during the last twenty-four hours. He emphasised that there were serious practical difficulties, particularly in respect of supply and accommodation, in keeping troops closed up in the forward areas for a long period. Experience in the last war had shown that after about three days these difficulties became acute.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

4. The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence informed the War Cabinet of what had transpired at the meeting with Dominion Ministers on the previous day when the question of the despatch of a Fleet to the Far East had been discussed with them. It had been agreed that a revise of the Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty (Paper W.P. (39) 125) should be prepared by the First Lord, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs and himself in consultation, which would cover the questions raised by Mr. Casey about our action in the event of Japanese aggression on the Netherlands East Indies. This paper would be laid before the War Cabinet before it was communicated to Dominion Ministers.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

5. The War Cabinet had under consideration a report by the Military Co-ordination Committee (Paper W.P. (39) 126), on the formation and equipment of Polish Forces.

The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence outlined paragraph by paragraph the considerations leading up to the recommendations of the Committee in their Report.

In discussion, the following observations were made:

(i) Paragraph 2.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs said that he had communicated the proposal to form one or two Polish Divisions in Canada to the Canadian Government, after speaking to Mr. Crerar. The Canadian Government had taken no decision. He pointed out that there was a considerable difference between raising Divisions of Polish refugees in France and segregating Polish Canadians in special formations. He was awaiting further information from Canada.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that no mention was made in the Report of the method of financing these Polish units in Canada.

It was suggested that the Poles were prepared to provide the necessary equipment on a voluntary basis. The Canadian Government should be consulted about this.
(ii) Paragraph 3.

The response to enquiry as to the use to be made of the four Polish Bomber Squadrons equipped with Bristol aircraft, the Chief of the Air Staff said that, although they could not be employed on operations until the personnel of these Squadrons trained at their new airfields, the Air Ministry felt that the important thing was to form the Polish Squadrons early, and thus obviate any sense of frustration on the part of the personnel concerned.

(iii) Paragraph 20

The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence said that the Committee felt that some general agreement should be made with the Polish Government, to which Annexes covering financial and administrative details could be attached as and when these details were settled. The Chancellor of the Exchequer emphasised that this general agreement, even though it might be of a provisional nature, should make clear the financial responsibility of the Polish Government. The agreement should also deal with the chain of command of the Polish units. The provision of equipment would have to be referred to in somewhat guarded terms in view of our own and French difficulties in this respect.

The War Cabinet agreed:

(1) To approve the conclusions and recommendations of the Military Co-ordination Committee in their Report on the Formation and Equipment of Polish Forces (Paper W.P. (39) 128), which are reproduced as Annex I to these Conclusions.

(2) To invite the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to ascertain from the Polish Government their proposals for financing the formation, equipment, and maintenance of Polish units in Canada, it being understood that the dollar resources of this country could not be made available for this purpose.

(3) To invite the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, after discussion with other Ministers interested, to submit to the War Cabinet for approval, prior to discussion with the French Government, the heads of an agreement in general terms to govern the further participation in the present war of the armed forces of Poland.

6. The War Cabinet had before them a Report (Paper W.P. (G) (39) 108) by the Military Co-ordination Committee, in which the question was examined whether permission should be given for interviews with, and photographs of, German prisoners of war.

The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence said that the recommendations of the Committee, which were in line with those previously put forward by the Deputy Chiefs of Staff, were summarised as follows in paragraph 7 of the Report:

(a) That no access to German prisoners of war in Great Britain should be permitted to representatives of the Press, either British or foreign.

(b) That, when any photographs of German prisoners of war are required for propaganda purposes, arrangements for obtaining them should be made by the Service Departments concerned. Similarly, interviews with German prisoners should be conducted by officers of the Service Departments.
(c) That the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should be invited to make it known that His Majesty's Government would be willing to give facilities to the accredited representatives of a Neutral Power to visit enemy prisoners of war in this country, while expressing the hope, at the same time, that the Neutral Power concerned would request the German Government for similar facilities to visit British prisoners of war in Germany.

The War Cabinet accepted the above recommendations.

7. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum (Paper W.P. (G.) (39) 104) by the Military Co-ordination Committee, dealing with publication of the names of Dominion Service personnel concerned in any particularly gallant or noteworthy war exploits.

The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence said that throughout the last war it had been the accepted principle not to publish the names of personnel who had taken a prominent part in any particular action either by sea, on land or in the air, except in cases where the official announcement took the form of an award of a decoration or of a mention in despatches. The Military Co-ordination Committee were strongly of opinion that this principle should continue to be observed throughout the present war, not only as regards United Kingdom but also as regards Dominion Service personnel. The Committee recognised that the matter was one in which each Dominion Government was entitled to take its own line, but they recommended that the Dominion Governments should be informed of the practice which the United Kingdom proposed to follow, and should be invited to conform.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs suggested that the existing principle with which he entirely agreed, was based on the importance—

(e) of preventing information finding its way to the enemy; and

(b) of not setting up invidious comparisons between equally deserving and gallant members of the same Service.

There was no question but that the Dominions must accept our ruling as regards any of their personnel serving in the United Kingdom Forces. The real difficulty would arise after the Dominions' own forces had been in action, when there might be a desire to give publicity to their exploits in ways not in accordance with our practice.

The War Cabinet agreed:

(i) That a departure from the existing principle would be detrimental to Service efficiency. In the case of the United Kingdom Services, therefore, the principle must be adhered to.

(ii) That as regards the Dominion Services, the matter was one in which each Dominion Government was entitled to take its own line, but that the Dominion Governments should be informed of the practice which the United Kingdom proposed to follow, and should be invited to conform.

(iii) That, it would probably be necessary in practice to be prepared for a certain degree of latitude in respect to the practice adopted by the Dominion Authorities in respect of Dominion Forces.
The War Cabinet had before them a draft statement to be made by the Prime Minister on action to be taken by way of retaliation against illegal acts committed by the German Government in their conduct of the war, with special reference to the recent sinking of merchant ships by magnetic mines. (Paper W.P. (G.) (29) 105.)

The first point dealt with in discussion was whether the statement should refer explicitly to the decision that retaliation should take the form of the seizure of exports of German origin or ownership. The view generally expressed was that this should be done.

Sir Alexander Cadogan said that, so far as the Foreign Office were concerned, the only reason for delay would be to give time for consultation. He had, however, already informed the French Ambassador of the decision taken by the British Government, adding that he was not sure whether the announcement to be made that afternoon would include a statement of the precise form of reprisal which we had in mind. The French Ambassador had seen no objection to an announcement being made immediately, if this was thought desirable.

It was agreed that the decision to seize exports of German ownership or origin should be referred to in the last paragraph of the statement, and should be linked with a reference to the fact that a similar measure had been adopted in the Great War as a reprisal for submarine attacks on merchant ships.

In the course of discussion, a number of other amendments were suggested: in particular, it was urged that it should be made clear that the German Government were violating Agreements to which they had themselves willingly subscribed. It was also decided to omit the reference to the number of civilian lives already lost.

The War Cabinet—

(i) Agreed that steps should be taken to seize exports of German origin and ownership on the high seas.

(ii) Agreed that a statement to this effect should be made by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons that afternoon, and approved the draft statement, subject to the amendments made in discussion.

The text of the statement as finally approved is contained in Annex II to these Conclusions.

(iii) Agreed that a similar statement should be made in the House of Lords after the Prime Minister's statement in the House of Commons.

(iv) Invited the Minister for Economic Warfare, in consultation with the Foreign Office, to prepare a draft order in Council, which should be submitted to the War Cabinet.

(v) Invited the Minister for Economic Warfare to initiate forthwith the arrangements and organisation required to give effect to the decision in (i) above, submitting to the War Cabinet any further measures which might be necessary to make effective the seizure on the high seas of exports of German origin and ownership.
The War Cabinet were informed that His Majesty the King had suggested that a more specific reference to the Dominions should be included in his Speech on the Opening of Parliament. It had been proposed that this might be achieved by transcribing the sentence dealing with the Dominions from the King's Speech on the Prorogation to the King's Speech on the Opening of Parliament.

In discussion, the view was generally expressed that the Speech on Prorogation should stand unaltered, but that the following addition should be made after the conclusion of the first sentence of the Speech on the opening of Parliament:

"My Dominions overseas are participating whole-heatedly, and with an effectiveness which is most gratifying to Me."

The War Cabinet agreed:

That the draft King's Speech on the Opening of Parliament, as revised, should be submitted to His Majesty the King for approval.

10. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he was advised that the time was not ripe to issue long-term loans of the type which would appeal to large institutions. The view taken was that a loan of this character should not be issued until the big payments made by the Service Departments had had time to reach the reserves of such institutions.

In the meantime, however, it was desirable to make an appeal to people of small means, and he proposed to make an announcement on the matter that afternoon.

In the first place, the existing series of National Savings Certificates would be withdrawn and a new series substituted. They would be issued at 15s.; interest would accumulate slowly in the earlier, but more rapidly in the later years. Repayment would be at the rate of 17s. 6d. after five years, and at 20s. 6d. after ten years. Interest on these certificates would not be subject to Income Tax.

There was, however, a total limit of holdings of £500 worth of Saving Certificates by any one person. He proposed to issue Defence Bonds, bearing interest at 3%, in £5 units, with a provision that up to £1,000 of these Bonds might be held by any one person. These Bonds would be repaid in seven years' time, with a premium of 1%. It was true that the sums obtained in this way would not be very large but it was desirable to make an early start.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

11. The Secretary of State for War gave the War Cabinet a short account of his visit to France.

Particulars of this account are recorded in the Secretary's Standard File of War Cabinet Conclusions.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

12. The Prime Minister said that on Thursday next the House of Commons was meeting at 12 noon. It was therefore proposed that the Meeting of the War Cabinet on that day should be held at 10 A.M.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.
ANNEX I.

FORMATION AND EQUIPMENT OF POLISH FORCES.

(Minute 5)

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations of Military Co-ordination Committee.

(i) We strongly favour the proposal that Polish units should be formed in this country, in Canada, and in France; and we recommend that this should be pushed on as fast as possible by the Departments concerned.

(ii) We ask the War Cabinet to endorse the arrangements which have already been made by the Air Ministry for immediately raising two First Line and two Reserve Bomber Squadrons as Polish units in this country.

(iii) The precise details of Polish Army requirements are not yet known, but General Sikorski has been invited to submit them in writing to the Secretary of State for War.

(iv) The existing arrangements for the employment of Polish Naval forces now serving with the Royal Navy are satisfactory, and will continue.

(v) We recommend the acceptance of the arrangements which have been agreed by the Treasury with the Admiralty and the Air Ministry, regarding the pay and allowances, &c., of the Polish personnel, who will be serving in this country; and, in particular, approval of the Treasury view that the cost of equipping and maintaining the Polish Bomber Squadrons, and of the pay and allowances, &c., of their personnel, should be finally charged to the credit already established in this country in favour of the Polish Government.

(vi) We recommend that the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs should endeavour to persuade the Canadian Government to agree to the formation of one or two Polish Divisions in Canada.

(vii) We recommend that, subject to the approval of the French, a Polish officer of suitable rank should be associated with the Anglo-French Permanent Military Representatives in London, on the understanding that he should be invited only to those meetings at which Polish questions are under consideration.

(viii) We suggest that information of the steps which we are taking in these matters should be communicated to the French through the channel of the Anglo-French Liaison Section, and that they, for their part, should be asked to give us reciprocal information of what is being done in France.

ANNEX II.

SEIZURE OF EXPORTS FROM GERMANY.

(Minute 9)

Statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on Tuesday, November 21, 1939.

Mr. Attlee (by Private Notice).

To ask the Prime Minister, in view of the fact that the laying of mines, such as that which sank the Stepan Babuik, during the last week and a half in these states, and without warning, is contrary to international law, whether His Majesty's Government propose to take any action thereupon.
The Prime Minister.

The House will be aware that during the last three days upwards of ten ships, six of which were neutrals, were sunk, with very serious loss of life, by German mines. The Hague Convention to which Germany is a party, and which she announced her intention of observing as recently as 27th September last, provides that when anchored mines are used every possible precaution must be taken for the security of peaceful navigation. This is the very essence of the Convention, as the mine cannot discriminate between warship and merchant ship, or between belligerent and neutral. The Convention particularly requires that the danger zone must be notified as soon as military exigencies permit, once the mines cease to be under observation by those who laid them. If unanchored mines are used, they must become harmless one hour at most after those who laid them have lost control over them.

None of these provisions has been observed by the German Government in laying the mines which occasioned the losses I have mentioned, and this fresh outrage is only the culmination of a series of violations of agreements to which Germany had set her hand. I need only recall the sinking of the Athenia, with the loss of 112 lives, and the subsequent destruction of British, Allied and neutral vessels by mine, torpedo, or gunfire. These attacks have been made, often without warning, and, to an increasing extent, with a complete disregard of the rules laid down in the Submarine Protocol, to which Germany subscribed, or of the most elementary dictates of humanity.

His Majesty's Government are not prepared to allow these methods of conducting warfare to continue without retaliation. I may remind the House that in the last war, as a measure of justified reprisal for submarine attacks on merchant ships, exports of German origin or ownership were made subject to seizure on the high seas. The many violations of international law and the ruthless brutality of German methods have decided us to follow a similar course now, and an Order in Council will shortly be issued giving effect to this decision.

November 21, 1939.