CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, February 16, 1942, at 5 p.m.

Present:
The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.
The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer.
The Right Hon. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.
The Right Hon. SIR EARLE PAGE, Special Envoy from the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia (Items 1-11).
The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.
The Right Hon. L. S. AMERY, M.P., Secretary of State for India and Secretary of State for Burma.
The Right Hon. SIR ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.
The Right Hon. BRENDAN BRACKEN, M.P., Minister of Information.

The following were also present:
The Right Hon. SIR EARLE PAGE, Special Envoy from the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia (Items 1-11).
The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.
The Right Hon. L. S. AMERY, M.P., Secretary of State for India and Secretary of State for Burma.
The Right Hon. SIR ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.
The Right Hon. BRENDAN BRACKEN, M.P., Minister of Information.

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CRANBORNE, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
The Right Hon. LORD MOYNE, Secretary of State for the Colonies.
Captain the Right Hon. H. D. MARCRESSON, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. LORD LEATHERS, Minister of War Transport (Items 4 and 5).
The Right Hon. HUGH DALTON, M.P., Minister of Economic Warfare (Items 4 and 5).
The Right Hon. JAMES STUART, M.P.,
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Item 12).
Admiral of the Fleet, Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff (Items 1-4).

The Hon. Sir ALEXANDER CADOGAN,
Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Items 1-8).
Air Chief Marshal Sir CHARLES F. A. PORTAL, Chief of the Air Staff (Items 1-4).

General Sir ALAN BROOKE, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Items 1-4).

Secretariat.
Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
Major-General Sir HASTINGS ISMAY.
Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.
Mr. L. F. BURGIS.

WAR CABINET 21 (42).

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1. The Chiefs of Staff gave the following information in amplification of Cabinet War Room Records Nos. 891–897:

In the home theatre the enemy had lost 19 aircraft, 8 probable and 22 damaged; we had lost 51.

In the Middle East the enemy had lost 43 destroyed, 12 probably destroyed and 28 damaged; we had lost 23 with 16 damaged.

Malta had been heavily attacked from the air. The few fighters that had been left at Singapore had been withdrawn, first to Palembang in Sumatra, and later to Java.

A Liberator machine with four officers returning to this country from the Middle East had been shot down in error. A Court of Inquiry was being held.

During the previous week 33,000 tons of shipping had been lost, including marine casualties. This figure did not include the possible loss of the Normandie or ships which must have been sunk whilst endeavouring to get out of Singapore.

Albacores had made a successful attack that morning on enemy warships in the Mediterranean and claimed to have hit two Italian cruisers.

The latest attempt to run a convoy into Malta had been unsuccessful. The position was under examination by the Chiefs of Staff.

In Burma, on the Southern Front, our forward troops were about 10 miles North-West of Martaban. The Japanese had attacked from Paan and also from Thatton.

Palembang Town and aerodrome had been captured by the Japanese on the 15th February. The Japanese were now threatening the islands on the east side of Java.

The Axis Forces in Libya were in two main groups, one in the Martuba–Tmimi area and the other about Mekili.

There had been no forward movement on the Russian front during the previous week and German counter-attacks had been successfully resisted by the Russians. Deep snow and thaw had affected the operations.

The Prime Minister said that, in reply to a congratulatory telegram from himself on the success of the Red Armies, M. Stalin had said that, in spite of present difficulties, he was confident that the common enemy would be broken.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

2. A general discussion took place on the military situation as a whole, with particular reference to the fall of Singapore and to the probability of further Japanese successes.

The War Cabinet—

Invited the Chiefs of Staff to prepare an appreciation of the military situation in the light of recent events.

3. The Minister of Labour and National Service suggested that the possibility of building fighter aircraft in India should be re-examined. This would probably involve the transfer of plant; but, when the factory was in production, considerable economies in shipping would result.

The War Cabinet—

Invited the Minister of Aircraft Production to furnish a report on this matter.
4. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty (W.P. (42) 86) containing a draft notification to the Vichy Government in regard to the use of French ships for supplying Axis forces in Libya.

The War Cabinet—

Approved the draft notification, subject to—

(a) the omission of the first paragraph and the word “now” in the second paragraph;
(b) the agreement of the United States Government being obtained before the notification was despatched.

5. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Minister of Economic Warfare (W.P. (42) 80) proposing that further shipments of wheat to Greece should be made in neutral ships, not under Allied charter—it was hoped to obtain Swedish ships now in the Baltic—and subject to specified conditions set out in the Annex to his Paper.

In discussion, the First Lord of the Admiralty asked that it should be recorded that, in his view, it was not practicable to arrange safe-conduct for individual ships, taking into account the conditions under which our submarines operate in the Mediterranean, and that the matter would be better dealt with by unescorted convoys of preferably six, or at least not less than three, ships at a time.

After discussion, the War Cabinet—

Gave general approval in principle to the proposals in the Minister of Economic Warfare’s Memorandum, subject to agreement being reached between the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister as to the exact conditions which should be imposed. (In the Foreign Secretary’s view, unless some of the conditions were less strictly drafted, the scheme was unlikely to be accepted.)

6. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (W.P. (42) 73) as to whether certain improvements to the steel works at Karabuk should be met from this country.

The War Cabinet was informed that, since this paper had been circulated, the Chairman of the Allied Supplies Executive had withdrawn his objections to the Foreign Secretary’s proposals.

The War Cabinet accordingly approved the proposal summarised in paragraph 5 of the Foreign Secretary’s paper.

7. The Prime Minister referred to three Memoranda which had been circulated to the War Cabinet on the allocation of air passages and transport facilities (W.P. (42) 50, 77 and 79).

At the Prime Minister’s suggestion, the War Cabinet—

Invited the Lord President of the Council to examine this matter in consultation with the Ministers concerned, and to determine whether alterations were called for in the present system of allocating air transport facilities.
Japan.
Proposed Reciprocal Exchange of British and Japanese Officials.

8. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (W.P. (42) 81) as to the reply to be sent to a proposal, made by the Japanese to the United States and ourselves, for an exchange at Lourencp Marques, of certain categories of persons. The question at issue was whether we should agree to an exchange on the basis of the categories of persons set out in paragraph 4 of the Foreign Secretary's memorandum (namely, British Officials and other Nationals in Indo-China, Siam and the Philippines, as well as Japan), or whether, as proposed by the Colonial Office, we should ask for the inclusion of officials and other nationals in the British territories lately captured by the Japanese.

In the Foreign Secretary's view, a proposal to include officials in British territories overrun by Japan would weight the scheme as a whole so greatly in our favour that there would be no chance of its acceptance.

After a short discussion, the War Cabinet authorised the Foreign Secretary to reply to the Japanese proposals on the lines set out in paragraph 4 of his Memorandum (subject to there being no incompatibility with the United States arrangements); and to arrange for the problem of colonial officials and communities to be taken up through the International Red Cross and the Argentine Government, on the lines proposed in paragraph 10 of his Memorandum.

Hong Kong.

9. The War Cabinet had before them a series of telegrams (W.P. (42) 82) and a letter from the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada (W.P. (42) 83) on the question of publicity about the treatment of prisoners at Hong Kong.

The War Cabinet decided as follows:

1. It was undesirable to give immediate publicity to this matter. The question should be brought up in a week's time.

2. The Minister of Information was invited to explain to the Press that publicity at the present moment on this question would have a bad effect on morale in the Far East, and would cause great distress to the relations of those concerned; that no official statement as to the position had yet been obtained; and that on balance, therefore, it was undesirable that prominence should be given to this matter for the present.

3. The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs was invited to inform the Dominion Governments of the decision reached.

Gas Masks.

10. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security (W.P. (42) 79), to which was attached a Report by the Home Defence Committee. The Memorandum proposed that, subject to suitable safeguards, the public should be advised that in present circumstances they need not carry their gas-masks at all times, but should leave them at their place of residence, where they could be reached easily in case of need.

The Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security emphasised that the instructions to the civil population should be in line with the orders issued to the Armed Forces in regard to the carrying of respirators. Further, if gas-masks were carried by the general public, the resulting wear and tear involved more frequent replacement.
After a short discussion, the War Cabinet—

(1) Decided that the present moment was inappropriate for a relaxation of the existing injunctions as to the carrying of gas-masks by the Civil population.

(2) Invited the Secretary of State for War to consider whether the instructions issued as to the carrying of respirators in the Army was consistent with the decision at (1).

11. The War Cabinet referred to their decision of the 27th November, 1940, that, with the exception of illegal immigrants saved from S.S. Patria, who should be allowed to remain in Palestine on the usual conditions, in future all other illegal immigrants attempting to enter Palestine should be diverted to Mauritius or elsewhere.

Owing to the absence of shipping to take them to Mauritius, a number of illegal immigrants, brought to Palestine in the Darien, had now been detained in an internment camp in Palestine for eleven months.

The Prime Minister raised the question whether these internees should not now be released. At the time when the War Cabinet considered this matter in November 1940 it had looked as though we might be subjected to a wave of illegal immigration. But now that the whole of South-Eastern Europe was in German hands this risk must be greatly diminished.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies said that this risk could not be ignored. He referred to a ship of 200 tons with 600 or 700 would-be immigrants which had sailed from Constanta and had recently arrived at Istanbul on the way to Palestine. On security grounds alone, any relaxation of the War Cabinet decision on this matter was open to strong objection. Further, any weakening of our attitude in this matter would afford encouragement to the very undesirable trade in illegal immigration into Palestine.

The War Cabinet—

Deferred a decision on this matter until the Secretary of State for the Colonies had ascertained the views of the Minister of State.

12. The Prime Minister said it was unfortunate that we had not succeeded in sinking either the Scharnhorst, the Gneisenau or the Prince Eugen, although it was believed that they had suffered considerable damage. But the picture of the incident, as presented by the British Press, showed complete ignorance of the position. If at any time during the last ten and a half months these vessels could have been repaired, they would have been able to break out directly on to the Atlantic trade routes. But, owing to efforts of the R.A.F., it had not been possible to render these ships ready for sea at Brest. On balance, the position was eased by their removal from Brest to German ports.

Discussion followed on the question of procedure, namely, whether the statement which the Prime Minister intended to make on this matter on the following day should or should not be made on a Motion for the Adjournment.

The War Cabinet was informed that in certain quarters it was believed that the Prime Minister would make a statement on the following day, to be followed by a Debate about the fall of Singapore.

The Prime Minister said that, as it was only a fortnight since the last Debate on the general war situation, which had covered the
situation in the Far East, and as a full report as to the events at Singapore had not yet been received, a Debate on the matter on the following day would not serve any useful purpose. He proposed to make clear to the House the reasons why, in his view, it was undesirable to have a Debate on either of these matters on the following day.

The War Cabinet—
Agreed that it was undesirable that there should be a debate on either of these questions on the following day. At the same time, it would be better that a Motion for the Adjournment should be moved by the Prime Minister or the Chief Whip, rather than that matters should be left so that the Adjournment of the House might be moved by some other Member.

_Great George Street, S.W. 1,
February 16, 1942._
THE FAR EAST.

Points made in discussion on this item.

No report had yet been received giving details as to the happenings at Singapore immediately prior to the fall of the fortress. We did not know whether any troops had got away, but this seemed to be unlikely.

It was clear now that Japan was a most formidable and dangerous antagonist. The Japanese were formidable alike as fighters and as tacticians. Our military performance in Malaya had left much to be desired.

Reference was made to a report submitted by General Percival appraising Japanese strategy and fighting qualities. This report also pointed out that the Japanese relied on mechanical transport much less than we did.

In retrospect, it now seemed a pity that we had sent the 18th Division to Singapore. When we had done so, we had thought that by doing so we should enable the defence of the fortress to be continued for at least a month.

Reference was made to the fact that the Australian Prime Minister had represented that failure to attempt to defend Singapore to the utmost would be an inexcusable betrayal. But it was now clear that these troops would have been better employed elsewhere.

The same question had now to be faced as regards Sumatra and Java. The maintenance of our line of communications with China by the Burma Road was of the utmost importance. We should have to consider whether we ought not to divert to Burma and to Australia reinforcements now on their way to the Far Eastern theatre, which might otherwise be employed to stiffen resistance in Sumatra and Java. This issue would have to be considered by the Pacific War Council at their Meeting in London on the following day.

Great George Street, S.W.1.
16th February, 1942.