CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, December 7, 1942, at 5.30 P.M.

Present:

The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. C. R. ATTLEE, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
The Right Hon. Sir JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Lord President of the Council.
The Right Hon. OLIVER LYTTELTON, M.P., Minister of Production.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer.
The Right Hon. L. S. AMERY, M.P., Secretary of State for India and Secretary of State for Burma.
The Right Hon. Sir JAMES GRIGG, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. Sir STAFFORD CRIPPS, K.C., M.P., Minister of Aircraft Production.
The Hon. Sir ALEXANDER CADOGAN, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.
Air Chief Marshal Sir CHARLES F. A. PORTAL, Chief of the Air Staff.

H.H. the MAHARAJA JAM SAHEB OF NAWANAGAR, Representative of India.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CRANBORNE, Lord Privy Seal.
The Right Hon. Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.
The Right Hon. BRENDAN BRACKEN, M.P., Minister of Information.
Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.
General Sir ALAN BROOKE, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Secretariat:

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
Lieut.-General Sir HASTINGS IMSAY.
Mr. NORMAN BECK.
Mr. L. F. BURGIS.
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1. The Chiefs of Staff reported the principal events of the past week.

Bomber Command had attacked Frankfurt and Mannheim, but had weather prevented the attacks from being very successful. On the previous day the Five–Lille Steel and Engineering Works and the Philips Electro-Chemical Works at Eindhoven had been bombed successfully, the former by United States aircraft. Coastal Command had made four attacks on U-boats with one possible hit. Enemy losses in the home theatre had been 9 aircraft destroyed, 2 probably destroyed and 14 damaged. Our losses had been 13 fighters destroyed (1 pilot safe), 29 bombers and 6 Coastal Command aircraft.

Anti-U-boat patrols off North Africa had probably sunk 2 U-boats and possibly damaged 4.

The War Cabinet were informed of the air situation in Tunisia, which, at the moment, was unsatisfactory owing to insufficiency of airfields, mechanical transport and labour. Great efforts were being made to overcome these difficulties. During the previous week enemy losses had been 85 aircraft destroyed, 29 probably destroyed and 36 damaged. American and British losses had been 79 aircraft destroyed and 24 damaged.

Aircraft based on Malta had continued to attack the enemy’s sea and air supply lines to Tunisia. Including belated reports, shipping losses for the previous week amounted to 81,500 tons.

As a result of the air attack on Naples, 3 Italian battleships had left the harbour.

An Italian blockade-runner had been sunk in the Bay of Biscay.

A further convoy had arrived at Malta and was unloading without interference.

The Japanese had made two attempts to get reinforcements into Guadalcanal. Both were believed to have failed.

Information was given about the positions now held by our forces in Tunisia, where our advanced troops had suffered a severe check. The work of bringing up our forces, and concentrating them behind the line now held, was making good progress; but it was of the utmost importance to interrupt the flow of enemy reinforcements.

During the previous week our forces had been closing up on the enemy positions at El Algeila.

Australian reinforcements had reached New Guinea. The Japanese were still holding out in Buna.

The Russians had made little progress either at Veliki Luki or at Rzhev. Near Stalingrad, however, important progress had been made and the Russians had succeeded in holding all their gains and shortening the ring round Stalingrad. The Russians were now within 170 miles of Rostov.

The War Cabinet took note of these statements.

2. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said there were reports of further atrocities against Jews in Poland, and the Governments of some of our European Allies were pressing for a further declaration condemning these outrages. Subject to the War Cabinet’s approval, he proposed to explore the possibility of a joint declaration on this subject by His Majesty’s Government and the Governments of the United States and the U.S.S.R.

The War Cabinet approved this proposal.
North Africa.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (42) 162nd Conclusions, Minute 5.)

3. The Foreign Secretary said that Mr. Mack, British Civil Liaison Officer with General Eisenhower, who had recently returned to this country from North Africa, had reported to him a conversation which he had had with General Bethouard, who had commanded a French Division in Morocco and was now at Gibraltar. The Foreign Secretary gave the War Cabinet an account of General Bethouard's views on the political situation in North Africa. The general conclusion which emerged from this and other information available was that, if we exercised patience and allowed the situation to develop, there was some prospect of bringing to the head of the French administration leaders well disposed towards the Allied cause who would be prepared to work together. If we were able gradually to introduce into the administration people who were favourably disposed towards us, they would be able themselves to get rid of the unreliable elements now included in the administration.

In this connection it was suggested that it would be advantageous if General Catroux could be persuaded to abandon his intention to return to Syria in the immediate future.

Reference was also made to the importance of relieving General Eisenhower of his political responsibilities at the earliest possible moment. Proposals for providing him with political assistance had already been made to President Roosevelt.

The War Cabinet took note of these statements, and invited the Foreign Secretary to see what could be done to dissuade General Catroux from returning to Syria in the immediate future.

Production.
Mission of Minister of Production to Washington.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (42) 147th Conclusions, Minute 1.)

4. The Prime Minister welcomed the Minister of Production on his return from his Mission to Washington. He had received from President Roosevelt a letter outlining the assistance we might expect to receive in shipping and referring to the agreements reached in respect of aircraft and tanks.

The Minister of Production said that he would circulate shortly a memorandum supplementing the information contained in the President's letter, and he asked that until then his colleagues would suspend judgment regarding the results achieved by his Mission.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

Prisoners of War.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (42) 164th Conclusions, Minute 3.)

5. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a telegram from His Majesty's Minister at Berne (No. 4408, dated the 4th December), stating that the International Committee had informed His Majesty's Consul at Geneva that the Germans had told the Committee officially that all prisoners would be unshackled during Christmas week. The International Committee intended to propose to both sides that this concession should be continued for an indefinite period after Christmas.

The War Cabinet took the view that this statement provided an opportunity for ending what might otherwise become a deadlock. It was possible that the Germans had made the statement with the idea of bringing this procedure to an end, and that, if the shackling were suspended during Christmas week, they would be glad of an excuse for not resuming it thereafter. It was felt that, without waiting for the Swiss Government to make their appeal to both sides to unshackle their prisoners from a given day, we should at once make a public statement to the general effect that, on hearing of the German proposal to unshackle our men during Christmas week, we had given instructions that German prisoners in our hands should be unshackled forthwith.

The Prime Minister said that Mr. R. R. Stokes, M.P., had a Question down, for answer the following day, asking whether the Canadian Government had been consulted before His Majesty's
Government in this country decided that German prisoners should be shackled. He proposed to reply that there had been no time for previous consultation with Dominion Governments before this decision was taken. The decision to unshackle these prisoners might now be announced in a statement to be made in the House of Commons after Questions on the following day, and the reply to Mr. Stokes's Question could be given as part of that statement.

The Foreign Secretary said that he would telegraph to Berne that night in order that the Swiss Government might be informed of the action which we were intending to take before the statement was made.

The War Cabinet agreed as follows:

1. The Prime Minister should make a statement in the House of Commons on the following day on the lines indicated at "A" above.

2. The Foreign Secretary should at once inform the Swiss Government of the statement which the Prime Minister was to make, and should indicate that, if meanwhile the Swiss Government made the public appeal which had previously been suggested to them, the Prime Minister would say that our decision was taken in response to that appeal.

3. The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs should inform Dominion Governments of the decision.

4. The Secretary of State for War should thereupon issue instructions for the shackling of German prisoners in this country to be discontinued forthwith.

[NOTE.—During the night following this meeting of the War Cabinet two telegrams were received from Berne (Nos. 4468 and 4409) stating that on the following day the Swiss Government would issue a communique calling on the British, Canadian and German Governments to unshackle all prisoners on the 15th December. The Swiss Government requested that prisoners in British hands should not be released before the 12th December, in order that the German Government might not suspect previous consultation between the British and Swiss Governments. It was decided that we must comply with this request, and action was taken accordingly, the War Cabinet Conclusions being regarded as overtaken by events. The Prime Minister did not make his proposed statement in the House of Commons, and the Dominion Governments were informed of the new developments.]

Offices of the War Cabinet, S.W. 1, December 7, 1942.
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Offices of the War Cabinet, S.W. 1.
December 7, 1942.