WAR CABINET 52 (44).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Wednesday, 19th April, 1944, at 6.30 p.m.

Present:

The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).
The Right Hon. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.
The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CRANBORNE, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
The Right Hon. Sir JAMES GRIGG, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. LORD LEATHERS, Minister of War Transport (Items 2-5).
The Right Hon. the EARL OF SELBORNE, Minister of Economic Warfare (Items 2-5).
The Right Hon. LORD CHEREWELL, Paymaster-General.

The Hon. Sir ALEXANDER CADOGAN, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Secretariat:

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
Sir GILBERT LAITHWAITE.
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1. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum (W.P. (44) 213) by the Prime Minister circulating a Note by the Foreign Office on the political crisis in Egypt.

The Prime Minister pointed out that the position which had arisen was very similar to that which had arisen in May, 1943 (the “black book” crisis). The present situation was more difficult to the extent that the King appeared to have a greater degree of popular support and that the Greek trouble was still unsettled. We were committed by the 1942 correspondence to refrain from interference in the internal affairs of Egypt, or in the constitution or changes of her Government. On the other hand we were under definite obligations to Nahas. He was still supported by a very large parliamentary majority which made it impossible to justify his dismissal on the grounds that he had lost the confidence of the legislature. Technically the King was, of course, entitled to dismiss his ministry, but it appeared that His Majesty was not prepared to face immediate elections and was concerned to ensure that Hassanein should have time to make arrangements to secure that an election, when it took place, would maintain him in power. Our Ambassador, who had great experience of Egypt, strongly favoured retaining Nahas in power, or allowing him to go to the polls himself. On the other hand, objections to using force had been urged by the local Commanders-in-chief.

Points taken in the discussion that followed were:—

(a) The normal term of the Egyptian Parliament was five years: three years of that term was still unexpired. Given that fact and the Parliamentary majority behind Nahas, he was surely entitled, if the King was unwilling to continue him in office, to an immediate election.

(b) While the record of the Nahas Government was not what it might be, we were under strong obligations to it for its constant support at very difficult times. Nahas might reasonably expect protection against an endeavour by the Palace so to manipulate matters that he would have no hope of winning an election.

(c) King Farouk was certainly more popular than he had been in Egypt, though outside that country it was doubtful whether there was really strong Arab feeling in his support. It was undesirable, if it could be avoided, to have to face trouble with the Egyptian army at the present time. Nor could we overlook the possible reactions on Egyptian labour in the ports and the danger of interference with the movement of supplies to Italy.

(d) There seemed to be sufficient forces available in Egypt to deal with any troubles that might arise, but the Chiefs of Staff had asked the local Commanders-in-chief for a considered military appreciation.

After further discussion the Prime Minister suggested to the War Cabinet that he should send a telegram on the lines that it would be rash for the King to dismiss a Government supported by a large majority at so early a period in the normal term of the legislature, and that on grounds of prudence we could not counsel him to do so. If in face of that advice His Majesty insisted on an election, the least he could do would be to give his present Prime Minister the right to go to the polls. The alternatives were, as the Ambassador had suggested, that Nahas was allowed to go to the polls or was kept in office.

He also thought that Lord Killearn should be asked for a fuller indication of his views. The comparison should be, not with the situation in the Lebanon, but with the very similar situation that had had to be faced in Egypt in the spring of 1943. It might be possible for the Ambassador to give some indication of the line on which Nahas Pasha’s mind was moving.
The War Cabinet—

Endorsed the Prime Minister’s suggestion and agreed that he should send a telegram to Lord Killearn on the lines suggested at “X,” the terms being settled by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in consultation.

Policy towards Turkey.

(Previous
Reference: W.M. (43) 185th
Conclusions, Minute 4.)

2. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum, dated the 4th April, by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (W.P. (44) 186), reviewing British policy towards Turkey.

The Memorandum concluded by making the following recommendations:

(1) We should maintain our attitude of aloofness and the ban on arms supplies in order that the present satisfactory state of uncertainty in Turkish minds should continue. For this purpose it was essential that no statement should be made in public, or to the Turks, about our Turkish policy.

(2) We should institute a rigorous economic warfare campaign aimed at the disruption of Turco-German trade. This policy would consist of (i) blockade measures, (ii) pre-emption, (iii) generous supply facilities for goods to the supply of which there was no economic warfare objection or which would exclude the Germans from the Turkish market or enable the Turks to ban exports of their goods to Germany.

(3) We should strive to interrupt communications between Turkey and Germany.

(4) We must obtain a due measure of agreement from the Soviet and United States Governments in this policy.

The Minister of State said that there had been important developments since the memorandum had been written. The Turkish Government had been conducting commercial negotiations with Axis satellites and it had been decided that our Ambassador at Ankara, acting in consultation with the United States Ambassador, should deliver a note to the Turkish Government to the effect that, in view of the rapidly approaching crisis in the war, when it was essential that the enemy should be deprived of all means of resistance, the two Governments must revise their attitude towards Turkish trade relations with enemy Powers. It had been made plain that, if the Turkish Government renewed existing agreements with Germany or her satellites, or entered into fresh agreements on the same lines, we would apply blockade measures such as had been applied throughout the neutral countries. The Turkish Government in reply had stated that collaboration on the lines now requested fitted in with Turkish foreign policy, and that within the limits of their material possibilities they would give us the help for which we asked.

The Minister of State said that in order to give effect to this policy—one of the main objects of which was to deprive Germany so far as possible of supplies of Turkish chrome—we should have to do two things:

First, we should have to buy Turkish products which would otherwise have gone to Germany.

Secondly, we should have to furnish Turkey with certain supplies essential for her economic life.

In discussion the question was raised of how supplies of such goods would reach Turkey. The Prime Minister enquired the position as regards the five ships which had been chartered to the Turkish Government after the Adana agreement.

The Minister of War Transport said that on instructions received from the Foreign Office, the charter of two ships which had been due to expire had been renewed for two months.
The Prime Minister said that this instruction which should have been brought to his notice before a decision had been given, did not seem to be consistent with the general policy which we had adopted in regard to Turkey. At the end of January, when negotiations with Turkey had been broken off, we had decided to bring pressure to bear on her by adopting a less forthcoming attitude, and in particular by cutting off armament supplies. Generally, he doubted whether the proposal to make supplies available to Turkey on the lines now proposed was consistent with the policy towards that country which we had pursued since the end of January. He thought that our policy in regard to Turkey would have to be reviewed and brought before the Cabinet on a later occasion.

The following other points were made in discussion:

(a) The Prime Minister also pointed out that, owing to the time taken for chrome exported from Turkey to Germany to affect the flow of finished munitions to the enemy forces, there was no direct connection between exports of chrome to Germany and impending military events.

(b) The War Cabinet was informed that the policy of pre-emption of Turkish products might cost from £5 to £15 million. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he attached great importance to our not spending money unnecessarily in pre-empting goods, which, owing to increasing disorganisation of communications, the enemy might in any event be unable to transport to centres of production.

(c) The Secretary of State for Air said that owing to the importance now attaching to other targets, he felt that it would be impracticable to give effect to recommendation (3), namely, that we should try to interrupt communications between Turkey and Germany by air action.

(d) The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs drew attention to the latter part of recommendation (1), namely, that no public statement should be made on Turkish policy. Lord Vansittart had put down a Motion for debate in the Lords on this matter. He hoped that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs would be able to dissuade him from proceeding with this Motion at this juncture.

The War Cabinet—
Agreed to resume consideration of our policy in regard to Turkey at a later meeting.

3. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Minister of Economic Warfare (W.P. (44) 206) dealing with the differences which had arisen between His Majesty’s Government and the United States Government in the field of economic warfare in relation to Spain and Sweden, and which might shortly extend to Portugal as well.

In the case of Spain, the attitude of the State Department had so far made agreement over the vital question of wolfram impossible, and in the view of the Minister of Economic Warfare involved a risk of the failure of our negotiations and, among other things, of the despatch to Germany of the large stocks of wolfram which were now awaiting transport.

The Prime Minister informed the War Cabinet that he had discussed the Spanish issue with Mr. Stettinius and had also telegraphed to President Roosevelt. There seemed reason in the result to hope that it was in a fair way to settlement on lines satisfactory to us.

The Memorandum explained that in deference to United States pressure we had associated ourselves with a demarche to the Swedish Government demanding the immediate cessation of all exports of ball bearings to Germany. The United States Government were anxious that if the Swedish reply was unsatisfactory we should agree to black-list the Swedish ball-bearing monopoly
(S.K.F.), and would themselves proceed to do so should we refuse. The Minister of Economic Warfare recommended that we should decline to black-list the firm, or to acquiesce in any measures (such as cutting off Swedish rations), which, in our opinion, would justify the Swedes in denouncing the Anglo-American-Swedish Economic Agreement negotiated in London in May 1943.

The War Cabinet were informed that an offer to buy all ball-bearings produced by S.K.F. had now been made by the United States Government. There was general agreement that it would be preferable to await the Swedish reply to this offer before threatening to black-list this firm.

The War Cabinet—
(1) Took note with satisfaction of the Prime Minister's statement on the Spanish issue.
(2) Invited the Minister of Economic Warfare to discuss the Swedish position further with Mr. Stettinius on the lines indicated at "X".

The Trotskyist Movement.

The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security (W.P. (44) 202) on the Trotskyist movement in Great Britain. The memorandum traced the course of the movement in Great Britain from its beginning in 1929 to its reorganisation in 1944 as the "Revolutionary Communist Party." The present membership of the party was probably well below a thousand; outside London it was strongest in Clydeside, and weakest in the Midlands and South Wales. It had three newspapers of which the most important was Socialist Appeal, a fortnightly publication with a circulation of 8,000 to 10,000 copies. Its propaganda appeared to be intended to stir up class feeling among the workers rather than to have any direct effect on the war. It had had some share in the recent strike of engineering apprentices and in some other wartime strikes, but its activity had consisted rather in advising and encouraging strike leaders than in provoking the strikes. Its influence was localised and small, and less in the mining than in the engineering industry. Generally, the movement seemed unlikely to rise to a position of any real influence.

The War Cabinet—

5. The War Cabinet was informed that Mr. Aneurin Bevan, M.P., and eight other Members had given notice that they intended to pray against the recent Order in Council* directed against persons instigating and inciting other persons to take part in strikes or lockouts likely to interfere with essential services. The War Cabinet was informed that it was possible that the prayer, being exempted business, would be taken before the adjournment of the House on the following day.

The War Cabinet agreed that it was important that when this matter was debated, it should be made clear that the new Regulation had the full support of the Government. It was accordingly agreed that the Prime Minister, when announcing the business of the House, should state that the Government were prepared to provide an opportunity for the matter to be dealt with on Friday, the 28th April. It was hoped, but was not certain, that this offer would be accepted. It would be necessary for the Government Whips to take suitable action to ensure that whenever the matter was debated the Government supporters were present in good strength.

The Prime Minister undertook to consult with the Chief Whip on the matter later that evening.

* S.R. and O. 1944, No. 491, amending Regulation 1A and adding Regulation 1AA to the Defence (General) Regulation, 1939.

Offices of the War Cabinet, S.W. 1, 19th April, 1944.