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It is requested that special care may be taken to ensure the secrecy of this document.

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, April 9, 1940, at 12 noon.

Present:

The Right Hon. Neville Chamberlain, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).


The Right Hon. Oliver Stanley, M.P., Secretary of State for War.

The Right Hon. Lord Hankey, Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. Sir John Reith, Minister of Information (Item 4).

Sir Horace J. Wilson, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril L. N. Newall, Chief of the Air Staff.

General Sir W. Edmund Ironside, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

The Right Hon. Anthony Eden, M.P., Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.

The Right Hon. R. S. Hudson, M.P., Minister of Shipping (Item 3).

The Hon. Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.

Sir Cyril Hurcomb, Director-General, Ministry of Shipping (Item 3).

Secrariat.

Sir Edward Bridges.
Major-General H. L. Ismay.
Mr. F. Hemming.
Mr. W. D. Wilkinson.
Lieutenant-Colonel V. Dykes, R.E.
Wing Commander W. Elliot.
Lieutenant-Colonel E. I. C. Jacob, R.E.
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Seventh Meeting.
Scandinavia: German Invasion of Norway and Denmark.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (46) 85th Conclusions.)

Military situation.

The War Cabinet continued their examination of the situation resulting from the German invasion of Norway and Denmark.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that the Chiefs of Staff had reviewed the situation before the meeting of the War Cabinet. According to a broadcast from Oslo, a small German force had landed at Narvik. The Chiefs of Staff had agreed that our destroyers in the Vest Fjord should go in and probe Narvik to ascertain the situation. One of the original battalions of the A conmouth force was moving up to Scapa, and this battalion would be available to support the operations of the destroyers at Narvik. As regards further land forces, 7 battalions would be ready by the 12th April, and could be used at Bergen, Trondheim or Narvik, as the situation might dictate. The first necessity was to deal with the German heavy ships.

The First Lord of the Admiralty said that the German transport which had reached Narvik must presumably have slipped past our patrol in the heavy weather prevailing at the time. As regards the general situation in Scandinavia, he felt that we were in a far better position than we had been up to date. Our hands were now free, and we could apply our overwhelming sea power on the Norwegian coast. The German forces which had been landed were commitments for them, but potential prizes for us. We could not have prevented these landings without maintaining large patrols continuously off the Norwegian coast, which would have been wasteful of our naval strength; but we would liquidate them in a week or two. It was heartening to find that the Norwegians were resisting, and we should proclaim to the world our intention to go to their assistance. The Norwegians would hem in the German forces on land, and we could do the same on the sea, either by laying mines or other naval action.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the Norwegians had few regular troops but considerable numbers of volunteers, who should be able to hold up the Germans in the mountainous country.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that M. Colban was showing himself very ready to co-operate with us in every way and seemed in good heart. Sweden was reported to have announced her intention of protecting her neutrality, and to have ordered general mobilisation. It would seem that our chance of getting to Gallivare was better now than at any time since the beginning of the war.

The First Lord of the Admiralty said that orders had been given to our naval forces to force their way into Narvik and Bergen. Trondheim would be left for the time being until the situation had clarified. The main problem was to deal adequately with the two German heavy ships, which were of the most modern type. It was essential to maintain a fleet in considerable strength in the Bergen area and to avoid having any weak detachments which could be "mopped up." If these two ships ran for home so much the better for us—we should then be able to deal with their land forces at leisure.

The First Lord suggested that we should make arrangements immediately to take under our protection Norwegian and Danish shipping all over the world, and that we should announce this action publicly. Our destroyers were at present engaged in an attempt to collect and safeguard the inward convoy from Bergen, which had not yet left Norwegian waters.
As regards other offensive action, he had communicated with M. Reynaud urging him to authorise the Royal Marine Operation to be carried out. He asked the approval of the War Cabinet to draft instructions to our submarine commanders to attack without warning all shipping in the Skagerrak. Normal mercantile shipping had been held up, and it must be presumed that any other ships were ships of war or transports. This was agreed to.

The Minister without Portfolio said that there were 100,000 tons of oil at Oslo which should, if possible, be denied to the Germans. He suggested that the Norwegian Government should be asked to take the necessary steps. The 200,000 tons of oil in Denmark must be presumed to have fallen into the hands of the enemy.

The Minister without Portfolio also suggested that the question of demolitions on the Scandinavian railways should be looked into. These railways would be required for the movement of Norwegian troops in the early stages, but it would be desirable to put them out of action before the Germans could use them to move out from their ports of disembarkation.

The War Cabinet—

(i) Took note of the above statements.

(ii) Approved the issue of instructions to submarine commanders, on the lines proposed by the First Lord of the Admiralty at "A."

(iii) Invited the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to draw the attention of the Norwegian Government to the importance of denying stocks of oil, &c., to the Germans.

2. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs raised the question of the Faroes and Iceland. He suggested that we should take steps to protect them on behalf of the Danish Government. The position of Iceland in relation to Denmark was comparable with that of a British Dominion to the United Kingdom. It was desirable, therefore, to avoid any risk of complication through Iceland declaring herself a neutral.

In discussion, the view was expressed that it would be better not to make any public announcement, and that, in the first instance, we should inform the Danish Government that, in view of the situation which had developed, we should have to take measures to prevent the Germans taking possession of the Faroes and Iceland, and that we might require facilities in those islands for Air and Naval units.

At a later stage in the proceedings, information was received that the Danish Government had decided to accept the German terms, and that, according to German reports, the occupation of Denmark was proceeding without incident.

In these circumstances, it was thought that immediate steps should be taken to secure our interests in the Faroes, and that a direct communication should be made to Iceland, through the British Consul, in the terms which had been proposed for the communication to Copenhagen. It was realised that the Germans might possibly have themselves sent forces to the Faroes and Iceland, in which case it would be necessary to dislodge them. In the meanwhile, nothing should be said publicly of our intentions, but action should proceed as soon as practicable.

The War Cabinet agreed—

(a) That the Foreign Secretary should inform the Government of Iceland, through the British Consul, that we would be prepared to help them to maintain their independence, and that we should require Naval and Air facilities for the purpose.
3. The Minister of Shipping said that action had already been taken to hold up all sailings of our own and Allied ships to Scandinavia and Baltic ports. Steps were also being taken to detain all Norwegian and Danish ships which were in our ports, and to divert all those at sea into Allied ports. It remained to consider what action should be taken towards Swedish, Latvian and Finnish ships. It might be advisable, now that these countries were so much in the war zone, to take the same action towards their shipping as towards Norwegian and Danish. Otherwise, there was a danger that, under German pressure, the Governments or the owners of the shipping might order their ships into neutral ports, and we might lose them.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer suggested that there were two cases to consider: First, the ships actually in port. These could easily be detained on one excuse or another until the situation became clear. Secondly, there were the ships at sea. It was more difficult to make out a case for diverting them into Allied ports.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs agreed. He thought it would hardly be necessary to divert Swedish, Latvian and Finnish ships unless they were actually sailing towards Scandinavia or the Baltic.

Agreement was expressed with this view.

Continuing, the Minister of Shipping said that all coal destined for Scandinavia had been stopped and diverted. The situation of our iron ore ships was as follows:

Five were at Narvik; five were anchored off Bergen, waiting to come in the next convoy; three were on the way; eight had been recalled to Kirkwall; and twenty-nine were in United Kingdom ports discharging.

Unless traffic to Narvik could be continued, he would like immediately to start diverting some of the outgoing ships to North African destinations to fetch ore.

The First Lord of the Admiralty said that we might be able to resume traffic to Narvik in a few days time.

The War Cabinet—

1. Approved the action which had been taken to detain or divert to Allied ports Norwegian and Danish ships.

2. Agreed that as regards Swedish, Latvian and Finnish ships—

   (a) those in ports should be detained for the time being:

   (b) those which were on their way to Scandinavian or Baltic ports should be diverted.

3. Invited the Minister of Shipping to arrange for similar action to be taken by Allied, Dominion and Colonial authorities.

4. Invited the Minister of Shipping, in consultation with the President of the Board of Trade, to make such arrangements as might seem right regarding the diversion of iron ore ships to destinations other than Narvik, on the assumption that it might be possible to resume sailings to that port in a few days time.
4. The Prime Minister said that he had been considering what line he should take in the Statement which he would have to make in the House of Commons that afternoon.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that a draft Statement was being prepared, the main argument of which would be, not that the Government had any knowledge of what had been about to happen, but that the clockwork precision with which the German operation had been carried out was a proof of the very elaborate preparations which they had made and of the precautions which they had taken to keep them secret.

A discussion then ensued on the statement which should be made about the operations of the Fleet, the Minister of Information having mentioned that at the Press Conference that morning an optimistic, and not perturbed, anxiety had been expressed as to what the Royal Navy was doing.

It was generally agreed that the House would be satisfied if it were pointed out that the Navy was in the act of conducting operations at sea, and that it would obviously not be in the public interest to divulge the details of those operations. It was thought better not to add that these operations involved wireless silence.

The War Cabinet agreed—

That the Prime Minister's Statement in the House should follow the lines indicated in the discussion.

5. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs informed the War Cabinet that M. Reynaud and M. Daladier would be arriving that afternoon by air at 3 o'clock and would be ready for a Meeting at 4 p.m. It was not known whom they were bringing with them.

It was agreed that as the Prime Minister was making a Statement in the House, the Meeting of the Supreme War Council should be held at 4.15 p.m. The War Cabinet would be represented by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the three Service Ministers. The Prime Minister asked that the other members of the War Cabinet, and the Chiefs of Staff, should hold themselves in readiness at short notice.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1,
April 9, 1940.