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W.M. (40)

126th Conclusions.

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WAR CABINET 126 (40).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Friday, May 17, 1940, at 10 A.M.

Present :

The Right Hon. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (<i>in the Chair</i>).	
The Right Hon. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Lord President of the Council.	The Right Hon. C. R. ATTLEE, M.P., Lord Privy Seal.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALIFAX, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.	The Right Hon. A. GREENWOOD, M.P., Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. A. V. ALEXANDER, M.P., First Lord of the Admiralty.	The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.	The Right Hon. Sir JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CALDECOTE, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.	The Right Hon. A. DUFF COOPER, M.P., Minister of Information.
The Hon. Sir ALEXANDER CADOGAN, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.	Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff.
Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.	General Sir W. EDMUND IRONSIDE, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

General Sir JOHN DILL, Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.
 Captain A. D. NICHOLL, R.N.
 Group Captain W. ELLIOT.
 Mr. G. N. FLEMMING.

WAR CABINET 126 (40).

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The Western Front.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 125th Conclusions.)
The Prime Minister's visit to Paris.

1. *The Prime Minister* gave the War Cabinet an account of his visit to France on the previous day.

He had found M. Daladier and General Gamelin depressed, but M. Reynaud in rather better heart. There was no doubt that the 9th French Army had sustained a heavy defeat. Their smaller anti-tank guns were unable to stop the German tanks and the German tanks' flame-throwing gun was effective to a range of about 300 yards, even against block houses. Some of the French troops, however, had retreated without sufficient cause.

The Germans had some 30 to 40 divisions massed behind the gap. It was now plain why the Allied troops had not been bombed in their advance into Belgium; the Germans had wanted to get us into forward positions in order to effect a break through and turn our flanks.

The German advance had now slowed down, probably to re-form and re-fuel. French divisions were being brought up from Alsace, and down from the North. General Giraud had been put in command of the 9th Army, the commander of which had been superseded.

The Prime Minister had also seen General Swayne who had reported that General Georges was dealing calmly with the situation.

The Prime Minister said that he had made it clear to the French that, unless they made a supreme effort, we would not feel justified in accepting the grave risk to the safety of this country which would be entailed by the despatch of more fighters to France. If the French would fight their hardest, we would do everything possible to help them.

He had also seen Air Vice-Marshal Evill, who had given a most encouraging account of the air fighting, in which the German losses had been four or five times as great as our own. The total German losses had been so heavy that there was little doubt that the disparity between the Allied and German air strength had now been appreciably lessened. The Germans, however, escorted their bombing attacks with such heavy fighter protection that it was difficult for our fighters to get at the German bombers.

He felt that the War Cabinet had been faced with the gravest decision that a British Cabinet had ever had to take. On receiving their decision (telegram No. 159) he had at once visited M. Reynaud and General Gamelin. He had first of all shown them the telegram (No. 206 DIPP), which had been before the War Cabinet at their Meeting the previous evening. He had then shown them the War Cabinet's reply which had heartened them to a very considerable degree.

He had told Air Marshal Joubert de la Ferté to remain with Air Marshal Barratt, who was very tired and must obtain some rest. Both Air Marshals were at General Georges' headquarters. He had told them that they must make supreme efforts to settle "The Battle of the Bulge"—"la Poche"—on which the fate of Europe depended. With the arrangements which had now been made, he thought that we should be able to dominate the air over the Bulge. There was a reasonable hope that, with a four or five days' respite from air attack, the French Army would be able to rally and re-establish the position.

The situation on the rest of the front seemed fairly satisfactory. A plan had been prepared for the withdrawal of the British Army in stages, if necessary, but he felt that we ought not to yield an inch of ground without fighting.

He had been told that the French had sustained very heavy losses in fighter aircraft and that only one-quarter of the force with which they had started the campaign remained serviceable.

The Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the French had been surprised by the direction and weight of the

German attack, by the strength of the new German tank, and by the devastating combination of air attack and armoured vehicles. There was no doubt, however, that some of the French troops had not fought well. The French were depressed at the lack of success of their light tanks of which they had lost two-thirds. Their heavy tanks had had a great success to start with, but they had lost half of them. They were now faced with the possibility of attack by nine German armoured divisions against which they could only muster three. Moreover, the German armoured divisions were stronger than their French equivalents.

Some comfort might be taken, however, from the fact that the flower of the French Army was in the North and not in the part of the line where the blow had fallen.

The Lord President of the Council said that the War Cabinet, at their Meeting on the previous evening, had been most disturbed at the situation revealed in the Prime Minister's telegram. They had realised that the battle might be decisive for France. They had felt that they must respond to the Prime Minister's courageous leadership and had decided that everything possible must be done to give the French a chance to rally.

The War Cabinet took note of these statements.

The Western Front (continued).
Despatch of fighter aircraft to France.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 125th Conclusions.)

Projected bomber operations.
Air operations on night of 16th/17th May.

2. *The Chief of the Air Staff* said that six of the eight fighter flights, which it had previously been decided to send, had reached France at dusk on the previous day; the other two would arrive that morning. A number of fresh fighter pilots had also been sent. The arrangements to enable six further squadrons of Hurricanes to operate in France would be on the lines described to the War Cabinet the previous night. Three of the squadrons were now operating in France. The other three had been held up by fog, but would almost certainly be ready to operate that afternoon.

The bomber force would be concentrated on the Bulge that night.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that attacks had been made by heavy bombers during the previous night, the 16th-17th May, on—

- (i) enemy road and rail communications at Maastricht, Aachen and Munchen-Gladbach;
- (ii) the coking plant at Hamborn;
- (iii) docks and marshalling yards at Dusseldorf;
- (iv) the railway sidings at Hamburg;
- (v) the aerodrome at Duisburg.

Successful attacks had also been made on the hydrogenation plants at Gelsenkirchen and at Castrop Rauxel. Only one of the heavy bombers sent out had failed to return.

Early that morning 12 Blenheims had taken off at 4.50 A.M. to attack objectives at Gembloux. They had run into 15 Messerschmitts before reaching the target. One of the Blenheims had been shot down in flames and news of the remainder was up to that moment lacking.

British Expeditionary Force.

The Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the B.E.F. had withdrawn to the line of the canal running through Brussels. Their position was satisfactory except on the right flank where the German armoured vehicles had penetrated the line. A strong counter-attack was being made. Our troops were distributed in great depth. The danger spots were the flanks. The Belgian Army on our left flank had not yet been attacked.

Extent of
German
advance.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the latest information received that morning was that the German advance had reached the area Laon-Soissons on the direct road to Paris.

The Chief of the Air Staff also reported that he had just heard from Air Marshal Evill that the situation was very serious. The Germans had made a considerable advance during the night and had reached the line Laon-Soissons. The necessary withdrawal of the air component was considerably hampered by lack of transport, and Air Marshal Evill had asked for troop-carriers to be provided. The situation with regard to the air component in the North was more satisfactory. The position of the Advanced Air Striking Force, however, was precarious. As a result of the rapid German advance, the large number of damaged aircraft, and the partial breakdown of communications, the Advanced Air Striking Force must be considered virtually out of action until it could be re-formed.

Information for
Press and
general public.

The Minister of Information suggested that more should be done to inform the general public of the seriousness of the situation, about which most people were in complete ignorance.

The Prime Minister agreed. The French communiqués and commentaries were framed with this in view. The public in this country should likewise be made to realise that the British and French Armies were engaged in a most critical battle which was approaching its climax.

The Secretary of State for War said that the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff was seeing the Military correspondents that afternoon. He thought that General Dill, without taking a despondent view, should give a frank account of the position.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs said that he had sent a "Most Secret and Personal" telegram to the Dominion Premiers on the previous evening, informing them of the seriousness of the situation and the steps which were being taken to meet it.

The War Cabinet—

Invited the Minister of Information to take the necessary steps to bring home to the general public the seriousness of the present situation.

Aircraft
Supplies.
Replacement of
casualties.

3. *The Prime Minister* drew attention to the urgent need for replacing the heavy losses which the Royal Air Force had sustained, particularly in respect of Fighter aircraft. Could another 12 Squadrons of Fighters be raised within the next month?

The Chief of the Air Staff explained that special steps were being taken to bring existing Fighter squadrons up to strength, and to form new squadrons. These steps included the salvage of all serviceable material and instruments from crashed and damaged aircraft. Despite this, he considered that it would be impossible to form as many as 12 new squadrons within a month. He would prefer that the War Cabinet should not, at the moment, take a decision to withdraw the Fighter Squadrons covering Scapa.

Purchase of
aircraft from
United States.
(Previous
Reference:
W.M. (40) 124th
Conclusions,
Minute 12.)

The Secretary of State for Air agreed that our resources would not allow of 12 new Fighter Squadrons being formed within a month. Enquiries were being made as to the possibility of accelerating and increasing the supply of aircraft from the United States of America. He drew attention to the encouraging references which had been made on this point by President Roosevelt in his speech on the previous evening. If available, such aircraft might perhaps be brought over in an aircraft-carrier.

The War Cabinet—

- (1) Invited the Minister for Air Production to attend a meeting of the War Cabinet on the following day to explain what steps could be taken to effect an immediate acceleration of aircraft production, particularly in fighters.
- (2) Agreed that, if the enquiries now being made resulted in further aircraft being obtained from the U.S.A., the Admiralty should be consulted as to the possibility of shipping such aircraft from North America in an aircraft-carrier.

The Naval Situation.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 124th Conclusions, Minute 4.)

4. *The Chief of Naval Staff* said that there were two ships missing in the South Atlantic, and that mines had been laid off Cape Agulhas. It looked, therefore, as though there was a raider in the South Atlantic.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

Norway.
Progress of operations at Narvik.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 124th Conclusions, Minute 5.)
Bearing of situation on Western Front.

5. *The Prime Minister* suggested that consideration should be given to the bearing of the new situation in France on our operations at Narvik. On the one hand, we knew that the Germans had a complete *Geschwader* in Norway, which was a welcome diversion. On the other hand, we should consider whether Narvik was eating up what we needed for our own defence, particularly in destroyers, anti-aircraft guns and Fighters.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the Chiefs of Staff had already reviewed our operations at Narvik in the larger setting mentioned by the Prime Minister. As a result, a telegram had been sent to Lord Cork, informing him that he must deal with the situation with the forces at his disposal and that he could expect no more, and asking for his views. Meanwhile, the situation in Northern Norway appeared to be satisfactory. A number of German prisoners had been taken, with comparatively few casualties among the British forces, and it seemed likely that Narvik would be captured at any moment.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

Invasion of Great Britain.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 123rd Conclusions, Minute 15.)
Troops available in this country.

6. The War Cabinet gave consideration to the need for maintaining sufficient troops in this country to deal with the possibility of air-borne invasion.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that there was no shortage in numbers, but that quality was lacking in certain cases. He had spoken to the Commanders-in-Chief on this point and had given them definite instructions that they must imbue the troops with the spirit that they must at all costs fight. Among the good material in this country was the London Division, the 15th Brigade and the Canadians. In addition, the Regular Cavalry were being formed into armoured units. The possession of mobile artillery was a reassuring factor.

Local Defence volunteers.

The Secretary of State for War said that there had been a good response to the appeal for volunteers to deal with parachutists. A hitch, however, had occurred over the question of their compensation in the event of injury, the Treasury taking the view that they should be regarded as civilians, whereas he (the Secretary of State for War) considered emphatically that they should be treated as soldiers, since they would be in uniform.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

Italy.

Possible intentions. (Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 124th Conclusions, Minute 7.)

7. *The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs* said that on the latest evidence he was inclined to think that Signor Mussolini had very nearly reached the point of bringing Italy into the war.

The Chief of Naval Staff and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff gave a short account of the action which it was proposed that our forces should take in that event.

Crete.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 124th Conclusions, Minute 11.)

The Lord President of the Council said that the Meeting over which he had presided on the previous evening had agreed upon instructions which should be sent to the three Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, giving them an appreciation of the position and authorising them to consult with General Weygand and the senior French Naval Officer in the Mediterranean, in regard to the position of Crete, and to concert preparatory measures with them.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements.

Italy.

Possible attack on Yugoslavia. (Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 124th Conclusions, Minute 7.)

8. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (W.P. (40) 157), suggesting a line of action intermediate between a declaration of war and a completely negative attitude, which we might take if Italy were to attack Yugoslavia and it were decided on military grounds to try to avoid being involved in war with Italy.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs referred to telegram No. 218 DIPP, dated the 16th May, 1940, from the British Minister at Belgrade to Sir Alexander Cadogan, reporting information which he had received from a confidential Yugoslav source. According to this information, Count Ciano had assured the Yugoslav Minister in Rome that Italy had no intention of attacking Yugoslavia, and that when she did enter the war she would do so "by the front door." The Yugoslav General Staff were also now of the opinion that Italian action would not be directed in the near future against Yugoslavia (telegram No. 211, dated the 15th May, 1940, from the British Minister at Belgrade). It seemed unlikely therefore, that the contingency referred to in his Paper would actually arise; but he had tried in his Memorandum to suggest a course of action which we could take if it did. It was not a very satisfactory proposal, but he was not able to suggest anything that would suit the circumstances better. It must also be recognised that a statement on these lines would have a profoundly depressing effect on the Balkans.

The War Cabinet:—

Invited the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to consult with the French and Turkish Governments, with a view to securing their agreement to the proposal that, in the event of an Italian attack on Yugoslavia, the British and French Governments should issue a statement on the lines proposed in W.P. (40) 157.

United States of America.

Personal message to the Prime Minister from President Roosevelt. (Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 123rd Conclusions, Minute 9.)

9. *The Prime Minister* read to his colleagues a communication which he had received from President Roosevelt in reply to his personal message.

The War Cabinet took note of the Statement by the Prime Minister.

*Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1,
May 17, 1940.*



