CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, May 27, 1940, at 10 P.M.

Present:

The Right Hon. WINDSON S. CHURCHILL, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, M.P., Lord President of the Council.

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALIFAX, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The following were also present:


The Right Hon. Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.

The Right Hon. A. DUFF COOPER, M.P., Minister of Information.

Air Chief Marshal Sir CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff.


The Right Hon. A. GREENWOOD, M.P., Minister without Portfolio.

The Right Hon. ANTHONY EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for War.


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

Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.

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

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.

Major-General H. L. ISMAY.

Captain A. D. NICHOLL, R.N.

Lieutenant-Colonel V. DYKES, R.E.
WAR CABINET 153 (40).

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(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 141st Conclusions, Minute 1.)

Capitulation of the Belgian Army.

The Prime Minister informed the War Cabinet that a message had been received from Sir Roger Keyes to the effect that the King of the Belgians had ordered his Commander-in-Chief to send a plenipotentiary to the Germans to ask for an armistice for the Belgian Army to take effect from midnight that night.

News of this had been received in Paris and General Spears had rung up to say that General Weygand had advised the French Government to dissociate themselves from the Belgians in this matter and to order General Blanchard and Lord Gort to fight on. He had asked for the Prime Minister’s support in this advice.

The Prime Minister said that he had acceded immediately to this request.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that a telegram had been despatched from the War Office informing Lord Gort that the French Government had been told that he would, of course, dissociate himself from this movement on the part of the King of the Belgians.

The War Cabinet was informed that the Belgian Government in this country was also dissociating itself from the action of the King. This would be announced by the B.B.C. that night.

The Prime Minister said that he had telegraphed to Sir Roger Keyes in the early hours of that morning that the British Expeditionary Force was withdrawing towards the ports, and that we should do our best to evacuate such of the Belgian Army as could get back to the coast. He had emphasised the importance of ensuring the King’s safety, and had made it clear that we should fight on to the end. This message should not have affected the King’s determination to continue the struggle, although, perhaps, he could not altogether be blamed now for the action he was taking.

Nevertheless, he had been very precipitate in seeking an armistice. Apparently the collapse of the Belgians was due to the heavy bombing to which they had been subjected that day. Any grounds for recrimination lay rather in the Belgian action on the outbreak of war than in the more immediate past. At the time when there had been only fifteen German divisions on their Western frontier, and the bulk of the German Army had been engaged in Poland, if Belgium had then invited us to enter their country, we could have established ourselves in a strong defensive position or invaded Germany. The King’s action was certainly not heroic. Presumably, he would now make a separate peace with the Germans and carry on as a puppet monarch. This might well be the best that he could do for his country, but we had to face the fact that it had the most serious consequences for the British Expeditionary Force. It was possible, of course, that the four divisions in the Lille area might manage to draw back and cut their way out to the coast. Our formations were practically intact and the troops were in excellent heart. They did not realise the plight in which they had been placed.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the collapse of the Belgians would undoubtedly place the British Expeditionary Force in the most serious peril. Lord Gort had no troops with which to close the gap and prevent the Germans breaking through to Dunkirk. No information had yet been received by the War Office as to the casualties which our Army had suffered. Some personnel had been withdrawn from France that day, but a ship leaving Dunkirk that afternoon had been heavily attacked from the air and had suffered some casualties from machine-gun fire.

The Prime Minister said that General Spears had reported that the feeling in Paris was better than it had been a short time before.
ago. This might perhaps be attributed in part to the results of M. Reynaud's visit to London the previous day. As for the effect of the Belgian defection on French resistance, the French had probably already written off Blanchard's army as a dead loss. The action of the Belgians might sting the French to anger, in which case they would be very much more formidable opponents to the Germans than in their present stunned and bewildered state.

Our chief preoccupation now was to get off as much of the British Expeditionary Force as possible. There would be very confused fighting in the area of operations. The bombers on both sides would be able to do little, as the opposing troops would be very much intermingled. The German bombers, however, would get their opportunity when our men reached the coast.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that large numbers of fighters had been operating that day over the French coast. We had lost 9 aircraft, but 23 Germans had been shot down for certain and several more unconfirmed. The German Air Force had been very active indeed during the day. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, was proposing to use formations of 3 squadrons the following day in order to compete with the large fighter escorts of the enemy.

The Secretary of State for War said that it was now clear that Calais had fallen. On the night of 25th-26th destroyers, which had been handled with the greatest gallantry, had taken off wounded and a small number of troops from the quay. Most of our troops, however, had been cut off from the quay, holding positions in the citadel and in the streets. During the day 20 Lysander aircraft, by a most skilful operation, had dropped food, water and ammunition for the troops. That morning, however, reconnaissance aircraft had reported that all fighting in the town had ceased.

The Minister of Information suggested that a statement should be issued referring to the gallant defence by the British troops. The Prime Minister agreed, but thought that for the sake of relatives no names of regiments should be given at present.

The Minister of Information suggested that the public should be given some indication of the serious position in which the B.E.F. had been placed. The French communiqués still had a cheerful tone. There was no doubt that the public were, at the moment, quite unprepared for the shock of realisation of the true position.

The Prime Minister thought that the seriousness of the situation should be emphasised; but he would deprecate any detailed statement or attempt to assess the results of the battle, until the situation had been further cleared up. The announcement of the Belgian Armistice would go a long way to prepare the public for bad news.

The Minister of Information said that he realised the danger of announcements which appeared to contradict the French communiqués, and he thought that it would be as well to remind the public of the constant German efforts to drive a wedge between the two peoples. At the same time editors could be asked to tone down the French announcements.

The Prime Minister thought that it would be necessary for him to make a full statement in Parliament, although it might be another week before the situation had cleared sufficiently to allow him to do so. He proposed to say that the essential dangers which had menaced this country in the first days of the war had not been greatly increased by what had happened. Our means of meeting them, on the other hand, had increased since the beginning of the war; moreover, we could take heart from the superior quality and morale of our Air Force which had been so clearly demonstrated.
The Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that he had had a conversation with the French Ambassador on the subject of recriminations. The French Ambassador had referred to the rumours which he had heard to the effect that the French by not counter-attacking had jeopardised the B.E.F. After all, the French were vitally interested in the Northern area, in which they had several Divisions. He (Sir Alexander Cadogan) had replied that no such rumours had come to his ears, but that they appeared to be as foolish as the rumours which he had heard that the intended drive to the South had not been carried out, owing to the failure of the B.E.F. to attack. M. Corbin had agreed that everything possible should be done to avoid recriminations.

The War Cabinet:

Took note of the above discussion and invited the Minister of Information to deal with the Press on the lines indicated at "A" above.

Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1,
May 28, 1940.
Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and Major-General Spears, at 8.20 p.m. on Monday, May 27, 1940.

Major-General Spears said that the French High Command had received a message from General Champon (French Mission to the Belgian Army) to the effect that the King of the Belgians had telegraphed to his Chief of Staff to send a plenipotentiary to the Germans to ascertain under what conditions an armistice could be arranged, and had suggested "cease fire" at midnight to-night, the 27th-28th May. General Champon had said that he had taken note of this communication, and had added that these conditions could not be settled without getting into touch with Paris. Inasmuch as the three Armies, the Belgian, French and British, formed one block, the Belgians could not act alone. General Champon concluded by saying that he was making contact with General Blanchard, and would be grateful for the instructions of General Weygand.

To this communication General Weygand had replied as follows:—

(1) I will advise my Government immediately.
(2) Whilst awaiting new instructions, I am ordering General Blanchard to dissociate himself from the Belgian surrender.
(3) General Blanchard will take all urgent decisions in agreement with General Lord Gort to counter this act of desertion.

General Spears then said that General Weygand desired the immediate agreement of the Prime Minister to the dispatch of the following telegram to General Blanchard:

"The French and British Governments have agreed to instruct their Commanders-in-Chief, Generals Blanchard and Lord Gort, to defend the honour of their flags by dissociating themselves totally from the Belgian armistice."

The Prime Minister replied to General Spears that he was in full agreement with the above telegram, and that instructions were being given to Lord Gort to continue his operation in conjunction with General Blanchard.

In conclusion, General Spears said that the Belgian Government were dissociating themselves from the act of the King of the Belgians, and that M. Pierlot was going to announce this fact on the wireless to-night.