CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, May 28, 1940, at 11.30 A.M.

Present:
The Right Hon. WINSTON 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 Right Hon. ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, Bt., M.P., Secretary of State for Air.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CALDECOTE, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.
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.
Admiral of the Fleet SIR ROGER KEYES, Bt., M.P. (part of Item 1).

The following were also present:
The Right Hon. A. GREENWOOD, M.P., Minister without Portfolio.
The Right Hon. A. EDEN, M.P., Secretary of State for War.
The Right Hon. SIR JOHN ANDERSON, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security.
The Right Hon. SIR JOHN DILL, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.
Air Chief Marshal SIR CYRIL L. N. NEWALL, Chief of the Air Staff.

Secretary:
Sir EDWARD BRIDGES,
Major-General H. L. ISMAY,
Captain A. D. NICHOLL, R.N.
Lieutenant-Colonel V. DYKES, R.E.
Mr. G. N. FLEMMING.
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Belgium.

Capitulation of the Belgian Army.

(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 143rd Conclusions.)

1. The Prime Minister said that the Belgian Army had ceased fire at 0400 hours that morning. He invited Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, who had just returned from Belgium, to give the War Cabinet his appreciation of the present position.

Sir Roger Keyes said that the Belgian Army had been completely demoralised by incessant bombing from large numbers of German aircraft. The Germans appeared to have maintained a ring of fighter patrols round the battle area, and, although our fighters had been seen in many engagements with the German fighters, they had been unable to break through the ring in order to attack the German bombers, which had circled round at low altitudes, bombing the Belgian troops with impunity.

Sir Roger Keyes commented on the precipitate flight of the Belgian Government. King Leopold had said that he wished to have nothing more to do with them. In his (Sir Roger Keyes’s) view the Belgian Government were entirely responsible for the chaos caused by the evacuation of the civil population, who had been told that asylum would be found for them in England or France. It had been noticeable that the Local Authorities had in most cases been the first to get away.

The Prime Minister expressed the War Cabinet’s warm appreciation of what Sir Roger Keyes had done in such difficult and dangerous circumstances. He did not think, however, that Sir Roger Keyes should return to Belgium, at any rate for the moment. (At this point Sir Roger Keyes withdrew.)

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He had seen Lord Gort on the 26th May, but had been unable to get in touch with him on the 27th. Lord Gort’s headquarters had been at Cassel, but they had later been shelled out of the town. Lord Gort, who was in very good heart, had said that any attack on the southward was out of the question. Although Lord Gort had not said so, Sir Roger Keyes did not think that he rated very high the chances of extricating the B.E.F. from their dangerous situation.

Sir Roger Keyes thought, however, that it might be possible for the line of the Yser to be held to cover the retreat. There were indications that British troops were within 10 miles of Nieuport. The flood waters were rising rapidly and tanks would be unable to move except on the roads. The latter were in good condition, but were crowded with Belgian guns and transport.

Referring to the efforts of the British Government to persuade the King of the Belgians to leave the country, Sir Roger Keyes expressed the view that only the King’s personality had held the Belgian Army together for the last four days. If the King had left when pressed to do so by His Majesty’s Government three days ago, the morale of the Army would have cracked at once. He asked that he might be sent back to Dunkirk where he thought that his presence might be of value in preventing panic.

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The Prime Minister said that the King of the Belgians would now presumably become the puppet of Hitler, and might possibly obtain better treatment for his people than if he had left the country and continued to resist from foreign soil. No doubt history would criticise the King for having involved us and the French in Belgium’s ruin. But it was not for us to pass judgment on him.

Later in the meeting Lieut.-Col. Davy gave the War Cabinet further information on the operations of the Belgian Army. He had left the King and the Belgian Army at 8 P.M. the previous evening. All credit should be given to the Belgians in any public announcements for their loyal co-operation with the B.E.F. throughout the retreat. They had met all our requests for readjustments of boundaries, movements of rearguards, &c., without demur. On the line of the Escaut they had successfully counter-attacked...
the German bridgeheads established across the river. When they had reached the line of the Lys, they had pointed out that there was no other line on which they could retire which had an anti-tank obstacle, except the Yser, which was three days' march away. This was too big a withdrawal to be carried out successfully. It was for this reason that they had decided to fight it out on the line of the Lys. On the first day the Germans had pushed bridgeheads across, but most of these had been driven back by the Belgians. Even when the Belgians had been thrown back five miles behind the Lys, they had again counter-attacked. For the last three days they had been subjected to incessant low-flying bombing and machine-gunning. They had had virtually no air support of their own, and the British fighters had been unable to get through to them as they had had to expend all their ammunition dealing with the German aircraft further to the seaward. In one counter-attack, which had been staged by the Belgians after an hour's artillery bombardment north-west of Ghent, the whole of the artillery had been destroyed by dive-bombers about half an hour after the bombardment had begun. A Belgian battalion which had been sent down to try and fill the gap between the Belgians and the British to the east of Ypres, had been wiped out by a wave of 60 enemy bombers.

The King had done all he could, ever since it had become apparent that the British Expeditionary Force might have to fall back on the ports, to support its withdrawal. His artillery had been ordered to remain at their guns until the Germans reached them, and then to destroy them. The Belgian losses had probably been very heavy indeed. They had inflicted heavy losses on the German infantry, but through lack of aircraft had been able to do very little against the German guns or aircraft.

The Prime Minister thanked Lieut.-Col. Davy for the information he had given.

(At this point Lieut.-Col. Davy withdrew.)

The Prime Minister then read to the War Cabinet the terms of the armistice which the Belgians had agreed with the enemy, as follows:

(1) All Belgian troop movements forbidden. Belgian troops must line up on the side of the road to await orders. They must make known their presence by means of white signs, flags, &c.

(2) Orders must be given forbidding destruction of war material and stores.

(3) German troops must be allowed to proceed to the coast.

(4) Free passage to Ostend is demanded and no destruction permitted.

(5) All resistance will be overcome.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that he had had a visit from the Belgian Ambassador, who had repeated the statement broadcast by the Belgian Prime Minister that the Belgian Government dissociated themselves entirely from the action taken by King Leopold. They were the only legal constitutional Government of Belgium and they would continue the struggle. He proposed to urge the Belgian Ambassador to ensure that immediate telegrams were sent to Belgian overseas possessions to inform them that their Government had not surrendered.

The War Cabinet:—

(1) Took note of the above discussion.

(2) Invited the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to ensure that the Governments of Belgian overseas possessions were informed without delay that the Belgian Government had not surrendered.
The Western Front.

Progress of operations.
(Previous Reference: W.M. (40) 143rd Conclusions)

Arrangements for withdrawal.

2. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the Germans were evidently pushing in two main forces, one through the Belgians and the other across the canal in the Hazebrouck area. The latter was believed to consist of 5 to 8 armoured divisions, supported by motor divisions. At the bottom of the pocket there was little pressure by the Germans, and the withdrawal there was being covered by small rearguards only. The 4 British divisions in the old fortifications would probably fall back to the line of the Lys that night. We did not know what the state of the roads was in that area, but they were probably extremely congested. The total number of men in the area encircled by the Germans was probably about 200,000. There were another 160,000 in France not engaged in the operations in the north.

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The First Sea Lord said that the Vice-Admiral, Dover, had reported at 11 A.M. that 11,400 men had arrived the previous night and 2,500 more were in passage across the Channel. There were 5 destroyers alongside at Dunkirk, each of which was taking on about 1,000 men. Considerable numbers of troops were arriving back at Dunkirk.

A later message from Captain Tennent at Dunkirk reported that there were 2,000 troops on the beaches and 7,000 among the sand dunes. All these were very badly in need of water, which the Army could not supply. Vice-Admiral, Dover, had informed him that a maximum effort would be made that night to send in flat-bottomed boats to take these men off the beaches. Embarkation by this means was impossible by day owing to machine-gun fire. Destroyers, however, would be taking men off the quays throughout the day. Practically all the men arriving at Dunkirk had their equipment with them, and most of them had their rifles. Many also carried their Bren guns.

A message had been received that S.S. Aboukir, which had left Ostend on the night of the 27th May with about 1,000 men on board, including the British Missions to the Belgians, had been torpedoed, probably by a motor torpedo boat, in the early hours of that morning. Thirty-three survivors had been picked up.

S.S. Queen of the Channel, transporting troops, had been bombed and was in a sinking condition, but it was believed that the survivors had been taken off.

Dunkirk itself was covered with a pall of smoke, and Vice-Admiral, Dover, had been instructed to use smoke from ships to add to this if needed.

The Secretary of State for War said that the troops evacuated from France were being despatched at once from the ports of disembarkation to Salisbury Plain and Aldershot Command. They would be attached to parent units in these places, who would ration them and look after them.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that he had ordered continuous fighter patrols in strength during daylight hours over Dunkirk and the beaches three miles on either side of the town. The other tasks allotted to Fighter Command were the protection of our own bomber sorties and patrols over the B.E.F. area.

The Minister of Information read to the War Cabinet a message he had just received from Sir Walter Monckton pressing for a frank statement of the desperate situation of the British Expeditionary Force. He feared that, unless this was given out, public confidence would be badly shaken and the civil population would not be ready to accept the assurances of the Government of the chances of our ultimate victory. The Minister suggested that he should make a short statement in the 1 o'clock news of the B.B.C.

The Prime Minister said that he would also make a statement in the House of Commons in the afternoon to the effect that the
British Expeditionary Force was fighting its way back to the coast under the protection of the Royal Air Force, and that the Navy was embarking the troops. It would be idle to try to forecast the success of this operation at this stage.

Later in the meeting the Minister of Information read out the terms of the broadcast which he proposed to make.

The War Cabinet—

(i) Approved the terms of the broadcast by the Minister of Information.

(ii) Invited the Prime Minister to make a statement in the House of Commons that afternoon.

3. The Chief of the Air Staff said that 50 German aircraft, confirmed, had been destroyed the previous day including 20 bombers, and 20, including 10 bombers, unconfirmed. We had lost 14 fighters, but in addition 40 to 50 fighters had been rendered temporarily unserviceable. A total of 81 fighters would probably be put into service that day from new production and repair. Large numbers of enemy aircraft had almost certainly been rendered unserviceable as a result of combats. These had not been included in the figures for the enemy losses which he had given.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that he had issued a special order to all Commanders-in-Chief on the previous day emphasising the need for exceptional efforts to support the B.E.F. and the naval forces carrying out the evacuation. He had also ordered the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fighter Command, to maintain continuous patrols in strength over Dunkirk and the beaches three miles east and west of it, to provide escorts for bomber sorties, and support to the B.E.F. itself. He had just received a message from the Vice-Chief of the Air Staff who reported that the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief was deeply concerned at the effect of this order on the air defence of Great Britain. Our fighter defences were almost at cracking point. If this exceptional effort had to be repeated over Dunkirk on the following day, the situation would be serious. The Chief of the Air Staff said that he could not accept the statement that our fighter defences were at cracking point, but he thought it only right to bring to the notice of the War Cabinet the view of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

The Prime Minister observed that the enemy might perhaps take advantage of the situation to send in a heavy attack against the United Kingdom. Our fighter defences might have to be re-disposed to meet it, but no doubt the enemy was fully extended like ourselves.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

4. The Chief of the Air Staff said that the Hurricanes had flown off H.M.S. Glorious. The Gladiators had shot down some 4-engined bombers. A report had been received that there was some shortage of ammunition for our aircraft, and H.M.S. Glorious had turned back to land some. There were 42 tons of ammunition at Narvik, but it was possible, of course, that some of this had been destroyed by enemy action.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.
5. The Lord President of the Council drew attention to the various indications recently that a German move from Norway was impending. There had been reports of troop movements from east to west in Southern Norway, and neutral missions in Berlin and Oslo had been stopped from sending cypher messages since the 24th May. The Chiefs of Staff had themselves drawn attention to the need for obtaining all information about possible German expeditions, and he suggested that special attention might be given at this time to Norway. The Germans might perhaps be intending a raid on Scotland.

The First Sea Lord informed the War Cabinet of the present dispositions of our naval forces in home waters. He did not think a seaborne expedition was practicable, although there was, of course, the chance that, if the Germans were willing to take the risk, it might slip through in bad visibility. We had submarines watching for movement from the Bight, the Skagerrak and the coasts of Norway. Air reconnaissances were also being carried out.

The First Lord of the Admiralty said that an air reconnaissance on the previous day had found nothing in the Norwegian fjords except two ships.

The War Cabinet—

Instructed the Chiefs of Staff to pay special attention to the completeness of our reconnaissance arrangements off the Norwegian coast, and to make a special report on the following day on the likelihood of a German expedition from Norway directed against this country.

6. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs drew the attention of the War Cabinet to telegram No. 841, dated the 27th May, 1940, from His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington, which read as follows:

"Under-Secretary of State to-day informed me that the response of Signor Mussolini to the President's communication had been entirely negative. He did not, however, expect action by Italy for the next few days. I then said to him that I thought the next and most important point would be Spain and that anything the United States Government did to encourage Spain to remain neutral would be of the utmost importance from the point of view both of Gibraltar and Portugal. The Under-Secretary of State agreed, but said that he did not think that Spain would abandon her neutrality until Franco had got rid of."

In regard to the French suggestions for a direct approach to Signor Mussolini, a telegram had been sent to the French Government on the lines approved by the War Cabinet on the previous evening. M. Corbin had been told of the gist of the message and it seemed that his personal judgment had agreed with our own.

The First Sea Lord reported that the Italian aircraft carrier Maraglia had disembarked her aircraft at Benghazi and returned to Naples. The question of safeguarding the Suez Canal against possible action by this ship therefore did not arise.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.
7. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council, describing the action which he had already taken to deal with the danger of Fifth Column activities (W.P. (40) 172).

The Lord President of the Council said that the Home Defence (Security) Executive which was being set up under the Chairmanship of Lord Swinton as described in his Memorandum was holding its first meeting that morning, and would take any necessary action. There was nothing further for which he required the authority of the War Cabinet.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

8. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council (W.P. (40) 173) setting out proposals in regard to the constitution and staffing of the Home Defence Executive.

The Lord President of the Council said that he had already been given full powers in this matter by the War Cabinet, but that he had thought it right to ask for their covering approval for the action which he had taken.

The Chief of the Air Staff said that the Chiefs of Staff had under consideration at the moment the question of the actual control of all the Forces and Services in this country in the event of an invasion. It seemed possible that under the existing plans control might still be in the hands of a Committee, which would not be satisfactory. The Chiefs of Staff were not, however, yet in a position to submit a definite recommendation.

The Prime Minister pointed out that it was equally important not to overlook the need for decentralisation of responsibility as well as for full co-ordination at the centre.

The War Cabinet—

1. Gave covering approval to the action by the Lord President of the Council in the matter of the Home Defence Executive as set out in his Memorandum (W.P. (40) 172).

2. Invited the Chiefs of Staff to put forward proposals in regard to the control of the Forces and Services in this country in the event of invasion.

9. The First Lord of the Admiralty reminded the War Cabinet that, at the Meeting referred to in the margin, it had been agreed that the initiative of raising the question of putting into operation the scheme for the diversion of shipping should rest with him. Both he and the Minister of Transport considered that the time had now come to issue the pre-arranged code telegrams (Painsaker Aggravated Generally) to the Port Emergency Committees. This would cause practically no dislocation of the working of the ports, but would ensure that the preparations were brought to a high state of readiness and that the arrangements could be put into force for any of the ports concerned as soon as necessary.

The War Cabinet—

Approved the proposal that telegrams should be sent to Port Emergency Committees, as proposed above, in preparation for any diversion of shipping that might be necessary.
The First Lord of the Admiralty said it was proposed to send telegrams ordering an immediate suspension of work on certain ships under construction as part of our long-term naval programme in order to concentrate the maximum effort on speeding up the construction of vessels that might become available in the near future. The vessels affected by the suspension included the battleships Anson, Howe, Lion, Temeraire and Vanguard; the aircraft carrier Indefatigable; the cruisers of the 1939 Programme; and the Fourth Emergency Destroyer Flotilla.

The Minister without Portfolio said that the Production Council were receiving every possible assistance from the Admiralty and the other Service Departments in their task of concentrating our productive resources on the most immediate requirements. He wished to emphasise that the suspension of work now ordered was temporary and would be reconsidered as soon as the present immediate crisis was over.

The War Cabinet took note of these statements.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister of Home Security said that he had been considering whether further powers were needed to deal with newspapers such as Action and the Daily Worker which were systematically and continually fomenting opposition to the successful prosecution of the war. He had intended to raise the matter in the Home Policy Committee, but the Lord Privy Seal had suggested that the matter ought to come before the War Cabinet. Under the present regulations, action could only be taken in a number of successive stages, which included a successful prosecution in the Courts. This would necessarily mean some considerable delay. He therefore proposed that a new Defence Regulation should be made to confer on the Executive power by Order to prohibit the printing, publication or distribution of any newspaper which systematically published matter of the kind in question. Power would also be taken to close down any printing press used in the production of such a newspaper.

He proposed that there should be a right of application to the High Court for leave to use a printing press closed down in this way in any case where it could be shown that the use of the press for the production of the offending newspaper had been "due to a mistake." If the Regulations were made, he would propose, before taking any action in any particular case, to consult the Home Defence (Security) Executive, which would enable them to share the responsibility with him and would not involve any delay.

There was general agreement with the view that the assumption of these exceptional powers was fully justified in the present situation. At the same time, it would be right that the War Cabinet should be kept informed generally of the use made of these very wide powers.

The War Cabinet agreed:

That a Defence Regulation giving the powers proposed at "X" above should be submitted forthwith for the approval of His Majesty in Council.
12. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs referred to the discussion on the previous day as to the improvement of passive defence measures in aircraft and munition factories. He asked whether this could be done by surrounding these factories by earthworks. No doubt there would be considerable technical difficulties, but, in view of the risk involved, every possibility should be explored.

The Minister of Home Security explained that the Supply Departments had full powers to arrange for protective works at their own establishments and to make grants in respect of Government works at factories belonging to contractors. He thought, however, that it would be very valuable if the Supply Departments were to state what had been done, and what further protection could be provided.

The War Cabinet:—

Invited the Minister of Supply, after consultation with the First Lord of the Admiralty and the Minister of Aircraft Production, to submit a report to the War Cabinet setting out what steps had already been taken to provide passive defence measures in aircraft and munition factories, and what steps could be taken to provide further additional protection.

13. The Prime Minister read to the War Cabinet a draft of a personal message which he intended to send out to all Ministers and High Government Officials.

The War Cabinet:—

Approved the terms of the message subject to certain drafting amendments which were settled at the conclusion of the meeting.