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WAR CABINET, 363.

*Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.,
on Monday, March 11, 1918, at 12 noon.*

Present :

The PRIME MINISTER (*in the Chair*).

The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E.	The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, M.P. Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. SMUTS, K.C.
The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G.	
The Right Hon. G. N. BARNES, M.P.	

The following were also present :—

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.	The Right Hon. the EARL OF DERBY, K.G., G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for War.
Rear-Admiral G. P. W. HOPE, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord.	General SIR H. H. WILSON, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., *Secretary*.

Captain E. ABRAHAM, *Assistant Secretary*.

Captain L. F. BURGIS, *Assistant Secretary*.

The Western Front.

1. THE Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that on the 9th instant the Germans had made two attacks, one on the Menin Road and the other at Houthulst Forest. Both these attacks took place on the front of about a battalion, and were preceded by a heavy artillery preparation. The attacks had both been repulsed and our lines regained. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was of opinion that the object of the Germans was to prevent our withdrawing troops from this portion of the line.

Transfer of German
Divisions.

2. With reference to War Cabinet 361, Minute 6, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that there were now 186 German divisions on the Western front.

Possible German
Attack.

3. With reference to War Cabinet 360, Minute 4, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that the situation looked very much as if the Germans meant to attack the British line, as they were concentrating on our front and had 92 divisions opposed to

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our 57. Some of these 92 divisions, however, were concentrated as far back as Namur, and might therefore be moved to the French front. Included in the above number were four divisions of which one had come from the Argonne, one from Russia, one from Italy, and one from Alsace.

General Wilson also reported that civilian traffic had been entirely suspended in Belgium. On the other hand, from Verdun to the south, that is to say, on the French front, traffic was reported as normal. Civilians were being moved out of all towns between Lille and La Bassée, but so far Lille itself had not been evacuated. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff added that there were heavy-artillery movements through Belgium towards our front.

Strength of German Divisions.

4. In answer to a question, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that a German division consisted of nine battalions, each battalion being about 850 strong. The German divisions were, roughly, of the same strength as ours, although, perhaps, ours might be a little stronger.

Armistice at Easter :
Proposal by the Vatican.

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5. The War Cabinet had under consideration telegram No. 15 from the Vatican, which proposed that there should be an armistice of one or two weeks for all belligerents in the Western and Italian fronts at Easter.

It was pointed out that any acceptance of this proposal would be bound to interrupt aerial reconnaissance work, and that this would be of great assistance to the enemy in preparing a sudden attack. Consequently, even though acceptance might give some clue to the date of the enemy's offensive, the War Cabinet felt that it was inadvisable to accept the appeal.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The question should be discussed with our Allies at the forthcoming meeting of the Supreme War Council.

Man-Power.

6. The Secretary of State for War undertook to give the War Cabinet a statement on the present position in regard to man-power.

Poison Gas.

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7. With reference to War Cabinet 355, Minute 10, the attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a suggestion in Mr. Churchill's Munitions Programme for 1919 (Paper G.T.-3835) to supplement our military preparations in 1919 by provision for a gas attack on a very large scale.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that he had the whole of the questions raised in Mr. Churchill's report under consideration. Limitations, he pointed out, were placed on the offensive employment of poison gas by the fact that the force employing it was prevented from penetrating into the gassed area for a period of time sufficient to enable the enemy to organise his defence.

It was suggested that the views of the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief in France should be ascertained on this subject.

Tanks.

m.d.1.
3.

8. With reference to the discussion on Tanks which took place at 10, Downing Street, on the 8th March, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff pointed out the difficulties which the defence would oppose to Tanks. Low-flying aeroplanes might be defeated by our

own aeroplanes; "camouflaged" guns might be circumvented by smoke and night attack; but land mines presented a problem of the utmost difficulty.

The Italian Front.

9. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that a good deal of snow had fallen on the Italian front. General Plumer had handed over his command to Lord Cavan on the 10th instant, and had returned to France.

Palestine.

10. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Allenby had pushed on another two or three miles, in pursuance of the development of his plans.

Mesopotamia.

11. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that Hit had been captured without fighting, the Turks having evacuated the place and retired to a position some 20 to 25 miles in rear.

Submarines.

12. The Deputy First Sea Lord reported that a trawler had dropped ten depth charges on an enemy submarine off the coast of Cornwall; large quantities of oil and bubbles were seen coming to the surface. He also stated that a report had been received from Dover that on the 10th March a patrol boat felt a heavy explosion under the water, and later a large oil patch was sighted; also wreckage, which appeared to be the internal fittings of a submarine. In addition, documents were picked up giving particulars of trials of "U.B. 58."

Giant Enemy
Aeroplane Bombed.

13. The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that during a bombing raid carried out by the Dunkirk patrol a giant enemy aeroplane, which had made a forced landing, was sighted on the ground and bombed.

Attack on Hospital
Ship.

14. The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that the hospital ship "Guildford Castle" was attacked by an enemy submarine on the evening of the 10th instant in the Bristol Channel, at about the same spot where the "Glenart Castle" was torpedoed. Fortunately, the torpedo which struck the "Guildford Castle" did not explode. The ship had a full complement of sick on board. The Deputy First Sea Lord was ascertaining further particulars, with a view to publication.

Riot at Antigua.

15. The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that a report had been received from the French Admiral at Kingston that a riot had occurred at Antigua.

Loss of
Mediterranean
Convoy. *W.L. 367/9*

16. With reference to War Cabinet 340, Minute 6, the Deputy First Sea Lord undertook to ascertain the composition of the force which escorted the convoy out of which five ships were torpedoed in the Mediterranean on the 6th February.

Russia.

17. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that he had received some evidence which showed that German and Austrian troops were moving on Odessa.

The Deputy First Sea Lord stated that he had received a telegram from the Naval Attaché, Petrograd, which said that the Russian ice-breaker "Tarno" deserted to Reval on the 5th March,

thus leaving the Fleet with only two ice-breakers. The battleships had been ordered to Cronstadt, but the crews wished to go by train. Orders had been issued to prepare the ships for destruction, but definite action could not be relied upon.

Stores at Archangel
and Murmansk.

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18. With reference to War Cabinet 346, Minute 4, and War Cabinet 357, Minute 1, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs raised the question as to what action had been taken by the Admiralty to protect the Allied stores at Archangel and Murmansk. He was of opinion that this question had a big bearing on the general policy of the Allies.

The Deputy First Sea Lord said that arrangements were being made to send an armed icebreaker to Archangel if required. This boat would fly the White Ensign. British and French cruisers were also on their way to Murmansk (War Cabinet 358, Minute 8).

The Secretary of State for War then read a letter that he had received from the French Military Attaché, requesting that we should send ships to bring away the most urgent Allied stores now at Archangel. The letter intimated that the French considered their own stores to be the more important, and should be brought away first.

The War Cabinet were informed by the Deputy First Sea Lord that the question of the removal of stores at Archangel and Murmansk was to be considered by the Allied Naval Council, and the subject was therefore adjourned by the War Cabinet.

Japanese
Intervention.

W.C. 364
11.

19. With reference to War Cabinet 359, Minute 11, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs explained the position at the moment regarding Japanese intervention in Siberia. America had first acquiesced in the proposed enterprise, but had since reverted to her misgivings. In consequence of this change of attitude, our Ambassador in Tokyo had not acted on the instructions conveyed to him by telegram (No. 198 to Tokyo) on the 5th March. The Japanese Government therefore had not as yet been officially approached on the subject of intervention in Siberia, in the character of mandatory of the Allies. Mr. Balfour had, on the 9th March, sent a further telegram to Sir C. Greene (No. 216), authorising him to proceed at once on the instructions conveyed in the previous despatch (No. 198). The only modification in the instructions was that our Ambassador was to report to the Foreign Office the results of his conversation with the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs before taking part with his French and Italian colleagues in any joint invitation to the Japanese Government.

In the discussion that followed, the opinion was expressed that Japan was unlikely to act, in view of the lukewarmness of the American attitude, and that the Japanese Government's state of mind could be inferred from Sir C. Greene's telegram No. 204, of the 7th March. It seemed that the situation was materially altered. Not only had Japanese eagerness abated in consequence of American reluctance, but most of the advice received from Russia dissuaded us from encouraging or countenancing a Japanese invasion of Siberia, as certain to drive Russia into league with Germany.

As against this view, it was urged that Russia, even if animated with hatred of Germany, was quite unable, without foreign assistance, to make any sort of resistance to the Germans. General Knox and Captain Proctor were instanced as among those who considered the situation lost unless Japan acted, and acted soon. There was little prospect of any hardening of the Russians if left to themselves; and to wait for an invitation from them to Japan would be to wait for an uncertainty and, in any case, to wait too long.

The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a twofold risk of the policy of Japanese intervention in Siberia: (a) Russian hatred of Germany, a foundation it might be possible to build on, would be transferred to us, for letting loose Asia on a temporarily prostrate Russia; (b) There was a possibility of a rift on a matter of cardinal policy between ourselves and the United States of America, to secure which was one of the aims of German policy. Japan in any case would not go far West, as she had ceased to feel confident that her Allies were on the winning side. We should not prevail on her to go far enough to engage in serious armed conflict with the Germans. All we needed for our immediate purpose was protection of the stores at Vladivostock. This could be done without the invasion of Siberia up to the Urals and running the risk of incurring all the odium and reaping none of the benefit.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs pointed out that it was early to assume that America would not go with us, and that Japan would refuse to go West. He urged that the result of our *démarche* at Tokyo should be awaited. If the present views of the United States of America, as expressed in telegram No. 929 from Washington, had, as might be inferred from a telegram (No. 73) from Sir W. Wiseman to Sir E. Drummond of the 6th March, already been communicated to Japan, we should obtain the considered opinion of the Japanese Government with the alternatives clearly before it.

It was decided that—

The result of Sir C. Greene's conversation with the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs should be awaited.

Formation of
Eastern Committee

20. The War Cabinet had before them a Memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Paper G.T.-3834).

It was pointed out that there were three Committees dealing with what were really three aspects of one problem, and that each frequently deliberated without knowing what had been decided by the others, with results sometimes inclined to be incoherent. One of these Committees, the Middle East Committee, was a Cabinet Committee; of the others, the Russia Committee was a Foreign Office Committee, and the Persia Committee interdepartmental, with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs as chairman.

It was decided that one Committee should be formed of these three, and that, as it would have to co-ordinate the work of several Departments, it should be a War Cabinet Committee; but it was agreed that care must be taken to safeguard the Departmental authority and responsibility of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The War Cabinet requested—

Lord Curzon to draft the Terms of Reference to this Committee.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,
March 11, 1918.