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SECRET.

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WAR CABINET, **511.**

Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, *Downing Street, S.W., on Tuesday, December* 10, 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.

Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C. SMUTS, K.C.

The Right Hon. A. CHAMBERLAIN.

The following were also present:—

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT MILNER, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., Secretary of State for War.

General SIR H. H. WILSON, K.C.B., D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Brigadier-General B. E. W. CHILDS, C.M.G., Director of Personal Services (for Minutes 1 and 2).

Mr. J. A. CORCORAN, War Office (for Minute 5).

Mr. P. GUEDALLA, War Office (for Minute 5).

The Right Hon. the EARL OF READING, G.C.B., K.C.V.O., His Majesty's High Commissioner and Special Ambassador to the United States of America.

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT CAVE, K.C., Secretary of State for Home Affairs (for Minutes 1, 2, 3, and 5).

Rear-Admiral G. P. W. HOPE, C.B., Deputy First Sea Lord.

SIR H. LLEWELLYN SMITH, K.C.B., Secretary, Board of Trade (for Minute 5).

SIR H. C. MONRO, K.C.B., Secretary, Local Government Board (for Minutes 1, 2, and 3).

SIR A. HIRTZEL, K.C.B., India Office (for Minute 4).

Lieutenant-Colonel W. DALLY JONES, C.M.G., *Acting Secretary.*

Mr. THOMAS JONES, *Assistant Secretary.*

Brigadier-General S. H. WILSON, C.B., C.M.G., *Assistant Secretary.*

Captain CLEMENT JONES, *Assistant Secretary.*

Confinement to Barracks on Polling Day.

1. LORD MILNER drew the attention of the Cabinet to the question of confining soldiers to barracks on polling day. He said that the matter was urgent and there was a good deal of agitation on the subject. By an Act dated April 1847, all soldiers are confined to barracks on "every day appointed for the nomination, or for the election or for taking the poll for the election of a member or members to serve in the Commons of the House of Parliament."

Lord Milner said that as the matter was one which was governed by statute, he had no power to issue any orders at variance with it.

General Childs suggested that perhaps the difficulty might be overcome in the following way. The Act laid it down that no soldier "shall be allowed to go out of the barracks or quarters in which he is stationed unless for the purpose of mounting or relieving guard or giving his vote at such election." If, however, the soldier were given leave a minute before the midnight preceding the polling day, he would not then technically be stationed at the barracks during polling day.

Lord Reading suggested that a certain amount of latitude might be applied to that part of the Act which read "that every soldier allowed to go out for any such purpose within the limits aforesaid, shall return to his barracks or quarters with all convenient speed."

While the discussion on this subject was going on, a telegram was received by the Prime Minister from Viscount Curzon pointing out the trouble which was being experienced in his constituency on account of the order that soldiers were to be confined to barracks on polling day.

The Prime Minister said that, unless the order were suspended, there would certainly be a strong feeling of resentment throughout the country. Polling was going to take place on the Saturday, and it was only reasonable for the soldiers to expect to be off duty from 2 P.M. onwards on that day. If the soldiers were confined to barracks, there would be a keen sense of hardship. The Act in question, which dated from 1847, before the Ballot Act, was not applicable to the present day, especially as all elections were now being held on one day.

The War Cabinet agreed—

That soldiers and sailors should not be confined to barracks on polling day.

If this decision, which reversed the Act of 1847, were challenged, the House of Commons should be asked for indemnity having regard to the fact that the matter had been overlooked during the stress of war.

The War Cabinet decided—

That the Admiralty and the War Office should issue the necessary instructions in accordance with this decision, and that an announcement of the decision should be issued immediately to the press.

Stamping of Absent Voters' Envelopes.

2. Attention was called to the fact that there was nothing in the voting instructions issued to absent voters to show that the envelopes containing the voting papers to be sent by post could be so sent free of charge to the Returning Officers, as was intended.

The War Cabinet decided—

That the Local Government Board should immediately issue a notice in the press to the effect that the absent voter could send his voting paper by post to the Returning Officer free of charge, and that such a notice should be displayed in every post office in the United Kingdom.

Printer's Mistake in the Absent Voters' Ballot Papers.

3. The attention of the War Cabinet was drawn to a mistake that had occurred in the printing of a certain number of ballot papers for absent voters. The "Daily Express" that morning had called attention to the mistake in the following paragraphs :—

> "A blunder affecting the absent voters, mostly sailors and soldiers, has been discovered. It relates particularly to the old two-member constituencies which have been sub-divided under the Franchise Act, and unless a remedy can be found immediately, thousands of service votes will be invalidated. Soldiers and sailors have been invited to put *two crosses* on ballot papers when only *one* should appear."
>
> "The envelopes to absent voters contained a slip instructing the electors how to vote. In the case of Portsmouth and Plymouth, and, we understand, other constituencies, such as the Isle of Wight and Exeter, the absent elector has been instructed to put a cross against the names of *Two Candidates*."

Sir Horace Monro said that, as far as the Local Government Board were aware, a mistake had occurred in the despatch of forms of identity for absent voters—a certain number of those intended for two-member constituencies having been sent from the Stationery Office to single-member constituencies; some of these had been issued to absent voters. The number so issued did not, he understood, exceed 3,000, and might be less. In the case of the Isle of Wight the matter had been discovered and stopped in time. It was possible that the missing 3,000, or perhaps 1,000 of them, had gone to Plymouth. Unfortunately, it was now impossible to put matters right in the case of the untraced 3,000 papers.

Direction of Allied Action and Military Policy in Russia.

4. The War Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (G.T.–6433) on the Future Military Policy in Russia, and a memorandum (G.T.–6443) by Mr. H. A. L. Fisher on the same subject.

Referring to the difficulties in connection with the action of the Allies in Russia, Lord Curzon said that Mr. Fisher was not present to speak on the subject. Mr. Balfour, however, had on more than one occasion explained our policy. In spite of this, certain people appeared to be doubtful as to our policy, and questions were continually being asked.

Mr. Balfour said that he had written a paper on the subject, which was a very confused question. Our own people in Russia naturally thought of nothing but Bolshevism. The paper which he (Mr. Balfour) had prepared explained fully the policy of the British Government.

Lord Curzon pointed out that, though our policy had been modified, in consequence of the cessation of hostilities, a difficulty still existed because a great many people in England objected to any British soldier still remaining in Russia, as they could not get out of their heads that they were there solely for the purpose of fighting Bolshevism.

The Prime Minister said he had a note before him from Mr. Shaw, who was standing for the Kilmarnock Division of Ayrshire, stating that he had been asked "what our boys were doing in Russia."

Mr. Balfour said that the paper which he had prepared explained our policy. At the request of the Prime Minister, Mr. Balfour read the paper. (Appendix.)

Mr. Balfour pointed out that the paper was primarily written so that the people in Russia, who were continually complaining that we were not doing enough, might understand what our policy was. It was written in reply to one class of critics, and by

implication answered other critics who inquired why our troops were still in Russia.

Lord Curzon concurred. If we withdrew our troops from some of the theatres of operations, such as Trans-Caspia, and left the people there to fight it out, it would mean misery to thousands of people who regarded themselves as our Allies, and almost certain massacre.

In reply to a question by the Prime Minister as to how many troops we had in Trans-Caspia, Lord Curzon stated it was difficult to say exactly, as it depended on what we understood by the term Trans-Caspia.

It was pointed out that people at home were more concerned with what was happening in Eastern Siberia and Archangel.

In reply to Mr. Balfour, who asked how many troops we had in Northern Russia, it was stated that the number was estimated at about 10,000.

The Prime Minister suggested that this was a very large estimate, and pointed out that Great Britain could not go on keeping troops in Northern Russia in order to protect some of the inhabitants from their fellows.

Lord Milner stated that if we withdrew the troops there would be no doubt that massacres would ensue.

Sir Henry Wilson pointed out that the troops were originally sent to Archangel to protect a submarine base, and further, that we could not get them away from Archangel now that the winter had set in.

The Prime Minister asked if during the winter months the force at Murmansk could assist that at Archangel if the latter were attacked by the Bolsheviks.

Lord Milner replied that it could do so by moving round the south of the White Sea. The point was that it was not so much the danger of our own force at Archangel, but if our troops were withdrawn the people who were friendly to us would be massacred.

The Prime Minister said that was his very point, and, as he had already stated, we could not keep troops in Russia merely to protect certain of the Russian people from their fellow-subjects.

Mr. Chamberlain hoped that the War Cabinet would not come to a hasty decision on such a big issue. He was of opinion that we were under no little obligation to those people who had joined us during the war. While entirely agreeing with the Prime Minister that our troops should be withdrawn at the earliest possible moment, he thought the matter was one which required very careful consideration, and that the War Cabinet ought not to come to a decision simply because certain people asked questions during the election.

The Prime Minister said he was under the impression that we had already come to some decision in the matter.

Lord Curzon stated that the decision which had been reached on the 14th November was that our troops were to remain. The local Governments were doing their best to make good their position against the Bolsheviks, and as soon as they could stand alone, we could withdraw our troops. In the meantime, if we withdrew the troops the people who were friendly to us would be butchered, and, in his opinion, our obligations in the matter were serious.

Lord Milner pointed out that the difficulty was really that our own people at home thought that the British troops were being used for the suppression of Bolshevism, which was not actually the case, as they were there simply to protect those people who had been friendly to us during the war.

Lord Reading asked if the War Cabinet could come to any decision without consulting our Allies.

Mr. Chamberlain said that, from papers he had seen, the Canadians were very reluctant to send any troops to Eastern Siberia.

Lord Curzon suggested that there were two ways in which the matter might be dealt with, which were either by the Prime Minister himself making a statement or by the issue of a statement by the

Foreign Office. Mr. Balfour's paper was prepared primarily for the consumption of our people in Russia, and he suggested that some statement should be issued for the information of the people at home.

The Prime Minister said he could understand the necessity of keeping troops in Eastern Siberia and the Caucasus, but he could not understand the necessity for keeping troops at Archangel and Murmansk.

Lord Milner pointed out that we had made a treaty with the local Governments.

Lord Curzon asked if physical conditions would not decide the question for us. If the troops could not be withdrawn from Archangel during the winter months, it would not be advisable to withdraw the garrison from Murmansk.

The Prime Minister said that we wanted to decide what our policy was going to be, and he asked if it was suggested that, as a matter of honour, we should retain British troops in Northern Russia so long as there was any doubt about the local Governments being able to maintain their own standing.

Lord Milner stated that we must give time to the local Governments to organise their forces so that they could hold their own against the Bolsheviks.

The Prime Minister doubted if they could do this for some time to come, as he had heard only the other day that the troops of one of the local Governments had refused to drill.

Lord Curzon referred to a note which had been received from General Maynard, in which he (General Maynard) pointed out that we must still continue to maintain our troops in Northern Russia at all costs, as we had agreed to do so with the local Governments, as a withdrawal would simply mean massacre.

The Prime Minister asked Lord Curzon what his interpretation of the agreement was, and pointed out that if it was against Bolshevism, there appeared to him to be no limit to the length of time for which we would have to maintain troops at the places in question.

Lord Curzon said he had not got the agreement, but he thought we ought to stand by the local Governments, at any rate for a while.

Mr. Balfour said he was not certain as to the exact terms of the agreement, but he was quite sure it did not commit us for an indefinite length of time. The question was a very difficult one, and it had always been recognised as such by the Foreign Office. He further pointed out that some of the people with whom we were co-operating in Northern Russia had done most excellent work for us during the war.

The Prime Minister again reiterated his view that the British Government could not undertake the protection of the inhabitants of any part of Russia against Bolshevism, and he pointed out that we had originally intervened in Russia with a view to embarrassing Germany. He further called attention to the possible difficulties of providing sufficient troops for all our requirements.

Mr. Balfour said that there could be no question of our being called upon to retain our troops in Northern Russia for an indefinite length of time.

The Prime Minister said if it was a point of honour now that we should not withdraw our troops, it was quite possible that the same argument might be brought forward in twelve months' time.

Mr. Balfour asked if it was realised that the French had just recently sent a division to the Crimea to operate against the Bolsheviks. This was quite a new undertaking and not the result of any obligation on the part of the French. While fully appreciating the difficulties which the Prime Minister referred to, he thought that if we were now to betray our friends in Northern Russia, we should damage our credit with every orderly body in Russia.

Lord Reading suggested that if we carried that point of view too far, we might commit ourselves even still further than we had done.

The Prime Minister agreed, but he said that he could not for a moment see that we were under any obligation to keep 10,000 men in Russia until Bolshevism was defeated, and he suggested that if the situation in Russia did not improve, it was conceivable that in four years' time the same argument might be brought forward.

Mr. Balfour thought that we ought not to assume that the local Governments would not get stronger and be able to maintain themselves.

Lord Reading asked if it was necessary to come to a decision now.

The Prime Minister stated that he did not for a moment want to come to a decision on account of the election ; he could not agree that our policy must be to keep troops in Northern Russia until the local Governments were sufficiently strong to fight Bolshevism without assistance.

Mr. Balfour and Lord Curzon stated that they entirely agreed with the Prime Minister on this point, but they both thought that we ought to retain troops in Northern Russia until the local Governments were in a better position to hold their own than they were at present.

The Prime Minister said he was not asking the War Cabinet to come to a decision now, but he protested against anyone taking it for granted that we should retain troops in Northern Russia until 3,000 Kerelians could beat 50,000 Bolsheviks. There was no objection whatever to putting off the discussion until next week.

Lord Curzon thought that it would be better to wait until Mr. Fisher could be present.

Mr. Chamberlain said there could be no question that everyone was in agreement that our troops should be withdrawn at the earliest possible moment, and what was to be decided was when that moment was likely to arise.

The Prime Minister suggesed that if we continued to keep troops in so many places, there would be discontent in the Army. He had been told already that there was a good deal of ill-feeling amongst the troops at Damascus because they had not been sent home, and requested the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to enquire into the matter.

Lord Reading thought that very soon the United States would be wanting to withdraw all their troops from Northern Russia.

Mr. Balfour pointed out that if such a situation arose it would settle the matter, as we could not be expected to keep our troops there if the American troops were withdrawn.

The War Cabinet decided that—

Further discussion of the question should be postponed until next week.

Extension of Powers under Defence of the Realm Acts and Regulations.

5. The War Cabinet had before them memoranda by the Secretary of State for War and the Minister of Munitions (G.T.-6347 and G.T.-6200), which Mr. Guedalla, on behalf of the Army Council, explained.

The Prime Minister suggested that Lord Cave should be asked to consider the question.

Lord Cave said he would probably put the matter before a Committee.

It was decided that—

The question should be referred to Lord Cave for consideration.

2, *Whitehall Gardens, S.W.*,
December 10, 1918.

APPENDIX.

Notes on our Policy in Russia by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1918.

THE general tenor of the telegrams which reach me, not merely from Russian sources, but from our own officials who have to deal with Russian questions, seems to indicate a very insufficient apprehension of what His Majesty's Government aim at doing to meet the present Russian situation. This is not, perhaps, surprising, seeing that the whole problem has been profoundly altered by the defeat of the enemy and the terms of armistice which have been successively imposed upon our various enemies.

One result of this has been to modify the principal motive which prompted our expeditions to Murmansk, Archangel, Vladivostock, and the Caspian. So long as a life-and-death struggle was proceeding on the Western front between us and the Central Powers, it was of the first importance to prevent, as far as possible, the withdrawal of German forces from Russia to France; but with the conclusion of a German armistice this motive has no further force.

For what then are we still maintaining troops in various parts of what was once the Russian Empire? To judge by the character of the appeals made to us from many quarters, it seems commonly supposed that these military expeditions are partial and imperfect efforts to carry out a campaign against Bolshevism, and to secure, by foreign intervention, the restoration of decent order and a stable Government. We are constantly urged to send larger bodies of troops to carry out these great objects, and it is frequently suggested—sometimes asserted—that by our delay in sending them invaluable opportunities for carrying out an effective policy have been lost for ever.

This view, however, indicates a complete misapprehension of what His Majesty's Government are able to do, or desire to do. This country would certainly refuse to see its forces, after more than four years of strenuous fighting, dissipated over the huge expanse of Russia in order to carry out political reforms in a State which is no longer a belligerent Ally.

We have constantly asserted that it is for the Russians to choose their own form of government; that we have no desire to intervene in their domestic affairs; and that if, in the course of operations essentially directed against the Central Powers, we have to act with such Russian political and military organisations as are favourable to the *Entente*, this does not imply that we deem ourselves to have any mission to establish, or disestablish, any particular political system among the Russian people.

To these views His Majesty's Government still adhere; and their military policy in Russia is still governed by them. But it does not follow that we can disinterest ourselves wholly from Russian affairs. Recent events have created obligations which last beyond the occasions which gave them birth. The Czecho-Slovaks are our Allies, and we must do what we can to help them. In the south-east corner of Russia in Europe, in Siberia, in Trans-Caucasia and Trans-Caspia, in the territories adjacent to the White Sea and the Arctic Ocean, new anti-Bolshevist administrations have grown up under the shelter of Allied forces. We are responsible for their existence and must endeavour to support them. How far we can do this, and how such a policy will ultimately develop, we cannot yet say. It must largely depend on the course taken by the Associated Powers, who have far larger resources at their disposal than ourselves. For us, no alternative is open at present than to use such troops as we possess to the best advantage; where we have no troops, to supply arms and money; and in the case of the Baltic provinces to protect, as far as we can, the nascent nationalities by the help of our fleet. Such a policy must necessarily seem halting and imperfect to those who, on the spot, are resisting the invasion of militant Bolshevism. But it is all that we can accomplish in existing circumstances, or ought to attempt.

(Initialled) A. J. B.

Foreign Office,
November 29, 1918.