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SECRET.

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## WAR CABINET, 374.

*Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on  
Wednesday, March 27, 1918, at 11.30 A.M.*

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. G. N. BARNES, M.P.

The Right Hon. the VISCOUNT MILNER,  
G.C.B., G.C.M.G.Lieutenant-General the Right Hon. J. C.  
SMUTS, K.C.

The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, 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. SIR E. GEDDES, G.B.E.,  
K.C.B., M.P., First Lord of the  
Admiralty.The Right Hon. the EARL OF DERBY, K.G.,  
G.C.V.O., C.B., Secretary of State for  
War.Admiral SIR R. E. WEMYSS, K.C.B.,  
C.M.G., M.V.O., First Sea Lord and  
Chief of the Naval Staff.General SIR H. H. WILSON, K.C.B.,  
D.S.O., Chief of the Imperial  
General Staff.Field-Marshal the VISCOUNT FRENCH OF  
YPRES, K.P., G.C.B., O.M., G.C.V.O.,  
K.C.M.G., Commander-in-Chief, Home  
Forces.Major-General SIR F. B. MAURICE, K.C.M.G.,  
C.B., Director of Military Operations.Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., *Secretary*.Captain L. F. BURGIS, *Assistant Secretary*.Lieutenant-Colonel L. WILSON, C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P., *Assistant Secretary*.

Submarines.

✓ 1. The First Sea Lord reported that an enemy submarine was certainly damaged, and probably destroyed, by patrol-boat "No. 51" in St. George's Channel.

French Submarine  
"Watt."

✓ 2. The First Sea Lord stated that he had received a report that the French submarine "Watt" had been attacked by one of our convoys by mistake. He regretted to state that the captain and one man had been killed, and three others wounded.

Enemy Submarines  
at Santorin.

✓ 3. The First Sea Lord reported that he had received information from Syra that the Greek authorities stated that an enemy submarine had entered Santorin harbour on the morning of the 26th instant, and that four merchant ships in the harbour had been sunk.

## Bombing Raids.

✓ 4. The First Sea Lord stated that an enemy machine had been brought down at Dunkirk on our side of the line yesterday morning, and that a formation of eight scouts attacked Dunkirk the same evening. Four of these were destroyed, one falling in our lines. He also stated that 17 25-lb. and 27 16-lb. bombs had been dropped on Ghisteltes aerodrome. Four bombs had also been dropped on Zeebrugge mole, and four near the coastal motor-boat base at Blankenberghe. All our machines had returned safely.

Immediate  
Reinforcements  
and their  
Transport.

5. With reference to War Cabinet 373, Minute 8, the Secretary reported that he had received the following letter from the First Lord of the Admiralty, with regard to the proposed increase of the movement of troops to France:—

*"Admiralty, Whitehall,  
March 26, 1918.*

"Dear Hankey,

"At a meeting in the Prime Minister's room with the Director of Movements and Railways and the Director of Transport and Shipping, the Prime Minister, Mr. Bonar Law, and myself being present, and also at a later stage the Adjutant-General, it was decided to increase the movement of troops to France to 30,000 a day.

"I was asked whether the Admiralty could provide additional escorts for this number. I said that, while it might be possible to reduce escorts in other directions and devote them to this cross-Channel work, I did not feel that my Naval Advisers would recommend that any of our consolidated forces should be reduced at the present time, and that it was infinitely preferable to take the necessary risk and send troop transports either unescorted or with a lighter escort, whether that be attained by increasing the size of the convoys or reducing the strength of the escort.

"I was to let the Director of Transport and Shipping and the Director of Movements and Railways know if, upon consulting my Naval Advisers, any modification of this view was to be made. I find that no modification is desired by them, and they concur in the views I expressed, and orders have already been given to effect what is desired; but, of course, it will be understood by the Cabinet that the thinning of the escorts and the possibility of troopships going unescorted, or with reduced escort, involves a risk which must be faced, but which, in the circumstances, the Admiralty consider preferable to reducing our consolidated forces elsewhere.

"As far as possible, it will be arranged to send these troopships with an escort, even although it is an inadequate one, so

that, should one be torpedoed, the escort will be available for life-saving.

"You will, perhaps, place this upon the minutes of the next Cabinet Meeting, so that it shall be on record.

"A copy has been sent to the Adjutant-General, to the Director of Movements and Railways, and to the Shipping Controller.

"Yours sincerely,  
"(Signed) E. GEDDES."

It was stated that 30,000 men could be got across to-morrow, but the Secretary of State for War said that he could not work up to this number at present, for two reasons:—

- (a.) That he could not move the men at present in sufficient numbers to the ports.
- (b.) That France would not be able to absorb as many men at the present moment into the army.

The Western  
Front:  
German Attack.  
The Present  
Position.

6. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff explained the present situation on a map. He stated that the enemy had made a small pocket between the Ancre and the Somme, just east of Corbie, at the junction of the two rivers. Later in the meeting, however, information was received that the Australians had counter-attacked and captured Morlancourt. The enemy forces were now about 25 kilom. from Amiens. Reports had been received that it was now raining, and the change in the weather should be in our favour. He reported that south of the Somme our troops were very weak, and that the resistance in this particular area was not very strong. Questioned as to any signs of the attack dying away, General Wilson stated that there were such signs north of the Somme. He further said that a message had been intercepted which gave information that a strong attack was likely to be made at Bucquoy, and that a fresh division of three German Guards regiments had been brought up with this object. We had in this area a New Zealand division and a number of tired divisions in reserve, but the 2nd Canadian Division was arriving shortly. With regard to our reserves still unengaged, General Wilson stated that there were five divisions available, two of which should arrive to-day. He further reported that the French were taking over the line up to the Somme, and that General Gough, commanding the 5th Army, was now under the orders of General Fayolle.

Attention was drawn to the menace to Amiens, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff considered the next few days critical.

Field-Marshal Lord French considered that the ground east of Amiens was very suitable for defensive purposes.

General Wilson reported that nine French divisions had been moved up as reinforcements, and that more divisions (the number of which he mentioned) were on their way.

At a later stage in the meeting the Director of Military Operations reported that a telegram had just been received stating that during the night the British troops were pressed back a short distance on both banks of the Somme, and that early this morning they were holding a position Rosières-Harbonnières-Sailley-le-Sec-Méricourt-L'Abbée, and that the enemy had now reached Albert. General Maurice also stated that at one time the enemy had crossed the Ancre north of Albert, but had been driven out by a counter-attack, and that north of this point there was no change in the situation. Information had been received that south of the river the 16th Irish Division, although it had suffered very heavy losses, was holding the ground well, but that a further attack was anticipated in this area. South of Rosières the Vth Army, under

the command of the French, was holding its positions well. There was no change at Roye and Noyon. Our aeroplanes had dropped 22½ tons of bombs on Bapaume and Péronne, and the low-flying machines were inflicting heavy losses on the enemy's reserves.

Condition of the  
Vth Army.

7. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that the Vth Army could no longer be regarded as a fighting unit. It was even doubtful whether any of the corps in this army could be considered as fighting units. There were, perhaps, some divisions, but there was very little information available, and he had at the present no idea of the number of casualties. He stated that this army had passed to the command of the French, who were now relieving it, and who were gradually extending towards the Somme. It was hoped that by degrees the divisions would be taken out of the line and re-organised. General Wilson stated that the French were detraining at Montdidier, and in this area it was really a race as to whether the French could collect enough men to prevent the capture of Amiens. It had been agreed that the British and French forces should do their utmost to avoid being separated.

Assistance by  
United States  
Forces in France.

8. With reference to War Cabinet 373, Minute 6, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that General Rawlinson had seen General Pershing at Versailles yesterday, and that General Pershing would not agree to put the American battalions in the British divisions, as he was very anxious to keep his organisation of divisions intact. He had, however, agreed to send American engineers to the front, and to put American divisions into the line to relieve French divisions. General Wilson said that there was to be another meeting at Versailles to-day.

The War Council decided that—

A strongly-worded telegram, drafted by the Prime Minister, with a view to ultimate publication, should be sent direct to President Wilson from the War Cabinet, explaining the whole situation.

Conference at  
Doullens.

9. With reference to War Cabinet 373, Minute 1, Lord Milner gave a full account of his recent visit to France, particulars of which he undertook to circulate. At an important Conference at Doullens yesterday, which was attended by the President of the French Republic, M. Clemenceau, M. Loucheur, Lord Milner himself, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Pétain, and General Foch, the following decision had been taken :—

“Le Général Foch est chargé par les gouvernements britannique et français de coordonner l'action des armées alliées sur le front ouest. Il s'entendra à cet effet avec les généraux en chef, qui sont invités à lui fournir tous les renseignements nécessaires.

“General Foch is charged by the British and French Governments to co-ordinate the action of the Allied armies on the Western front. He will work to this end with the Commanders-in-Chief, who are asked to furnish him with all necessary information.

“(Signé) CLEMENCEAU.  
MILNER.

“(Signed) CLEMENCEAU.  
MILNER.

“Doullens, le 26 mars, 1918.”

“Doullens, March 26, 1918.”

Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig had approved and welcomed this arrangement. Lord Milner explained that the practical effect of this arrangement was to put the supreme control under General

Foch, who would thus supersede the Executive War Board at Versailles.

The War Cabinet approved this arrangement, and placed on record their thanks to Lord Milner for the action he had taken.

The War Cabinet decided that the following action should be taken :—

- (a.) That the Chief of the Imperial General Staff should inform Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig of the approval of the War Cabinet to the above agreement.
- (b.) That the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should inform the French Government by telegram of the War Cabinet's approval.
- (c.) That the Prime Minister should incorporate this information in his telegram to President Wilson, alluded to in Minute 8.

**German Reserves.**

10. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff reported that the Germans still had 31 divisions in reserve and not yet employed. Their total strength was 193 divisions on the Western front, of which 70 had been identified by the British forces during the recent fighting.

**Telegram to Lord Reading.**

11. With reference to War Cabinet 373, Minute 7, the War Cabinet took note of the following telegram which had been sent by the Prime Minister to Lord Reading to be read at a banquet in New York :—

“ Your personal telegram of 25th March.

“ We are at the crisis of the war. Attacked by an immense superiority of German troops our army has been forced to retire. The retirement has been carried out methodically before the pressure of a steady succession of fresh German reserves, which are suffering enormous losses. The situation is being faced with splendid courage and resolution. The dogged pluck of our troops has for the moment checked the ceaseless onrush of the enemy, and the French have now joined in the struggle. But this battle, the greatest and most momentous in the history of the world, is only just beginning. Throughout it French and British are buoyed up with the knowledge that the great republic of the West will neglect no effort which can hasten its troops and its ships to Europe. In war, time is vital. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of getting American reinforcements across the Atlantic in the shortest possible space of time.

(Signed)

“ LLOYD GEORGE.”

Ireland :  
Compulsory  
Military  
Service.

3.

ml 3.45  
2.

12. With reference to War Cabinet 370<sup>3</sup>, Minute 11, a preliminary discussion took place on the subject of compulsory military service in Ireland.

The Prime Minister said that he had yesterday seen the Chief Secretary for Ireland, General Sir Bryan Mahon, and General Bryne, the head of the Royal Irish Constabulary, whom he had asked to come over to consider the question of man-power. He had first interviewed Mr. Duke, who had expressed grave doubts on the proposal. He then saw General Bryne, who expressed the opinion that he had no doubt that compulsory military service in Ireland would be a mistake; that, by passing and enforcing such a measure, both the whole of the Catholics and the Nationalists in Ireland would be united against the British Empire; that there would be the greatest difficulty in enlisting men; that in towns there would be actual riots; and that, when the men were obtained, he was very doubtful as to what their actual worth would be. The Prime Minister had then interviewed Sir Bryan Mahon, who, on the whole, was in favour of the proposal. General Mahon, however, was of opinion that considerable trouble would ensue in Ireland. The Prime Minister informed the War Cabinet that he had left General Mahon and General Byrne together, in order to discuss the proposal, and to make a report for his information. The Chief Secretary had forwarded the report to the Prime Minister (Appendix).

On the other hand, the War Cabinet were reminded that the enforcement of a drastic application of compulsory military service in Great Britain, as contemplated in the draft Bill circulated by the Minister of National Service (Paper G.T.-4036), would be very difficult if Ireland were exempted.

The War Cabinet decided that—

This question should be discussed at a War Cabinet meeting to be summoned for 5.30 that evening, and that the Chief Secretary for Ireland, General Sir Bryan Mahon, and General Byrne, the head of the Royal Irish Constabulary, should be invited to attend.

With a view to throwing some light on the probable fighting value of conscripted Irishmen, on which expert opinion is divided—

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff was asked to obtain the facts as to the fighting qualities displayed by the 16th Irish Division during the recent fighting.

In the most recent phase of the battle this division had been reported to be fighting well (see Minute 6).

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,  
March 27, 1918.

## APPENDIX.

G.T.-4049.

## APPLICATION OF MILITARY SERVICE ACT TO IRELAND.

*Memorandum by General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Irish Command.*

THE following was written by General Mahon, and the parts underlined\* are the comments on the memorandum made by General Byrne, who otherwise approves of it.

(Signed) H. E. DUKE.

March 26, 1918.

Conscription can be enforced, but with the *greatest* difficulty. It will be *bitterly* opposed by the *united* Nationalists and the clergy. The present time is the worst for it since I have been in Ireland, because the cry will be: England down, "Ireland's opportunity." Some of the difficulties would be *organised* strikes *dislocating the life of the country*, railway, post office and telegraph communications cut. There are fewer troops in Ireland than there have been for some time. More have to be taken. We would have to have additional troops for the time, at least two brigades (*? I think considerably more*). These, I do not anticipate, would be required for more than three months.

Ireland would have to be divided into several districts. It would be a question that will have to be considered if compulsion is put in force in the whole simultaneously, or district by district. But to render it feasible either way, the country must be put under some kind of military control. Law would have to be dropped, because ordinarily, for the first fortnight at least, there would be bloodshed and a great deal of suffering to the civil population in every way, and hardships.

The number of men we would get I cannot estimate. Ten months ago I estimated 160,000, with very liberal exemptions. It ought to be more now with increased age. I am of opinion that *some* of the men when got would make good and reliable soldiers (*a considerable number might be likely to give trouble*). *The police would have to be concentrated into larger parties, thus curtailing their usefulness. Coast watching would be interfered with, also tillage.*

I would suggest that the first thing is to get all known leaders out of the way at once; *extra troops should be on the spot simultaneously*, and everyone, irrespective of who he is, arrested on first sign of giving trouble.

These measures would be drastic, but the situation is serious, or it would not be considered necessary to have conscription at this inopportune time.



