

MOST SECRET.

W.M.(40) 62nd CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 7.

Confidential Annex.

(7th March, 1940.)

ASSISTANCE TO FINLAND. (Previous Reference: W.M.(40)61st Conclusions, Minute 5.)

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR recounted a long talk which he had had on the previous day with Major Magill, who had returned by air from Finland on Monday, the 4th March. Major Magill, who had many and close connections with the Swedes and Finns, had seen much of Field-Marshal Mannerheim, and reported that he had never seen him so depressed. Major Magill's assessment of the present situation had been as follows. The Finns, by character, had immense powers of endurance, but once they cracked they would break altogether. There were signs of physical failing, due to the tremendous strain to which the rank and file had been put, but the fighting troops would not be likely to give in unless the Finnish High Command began to weaken. The fear, therefore, was that the rot would set in at the top, particularly as the result of the constant defeatist pressure which Sweden never ceased to exert. Furthermore, the ability of the Russians to follow up their recent attacks had undoubtedly come as a catastrophic surprise to the Finnish High Command. There was still time to save the situation, but the remedy - and according to Major Magill, the only remedy in the opinion of the Finns - was the immediate despatch of bombing aircraft. The Finns had had to withdraw two Divisions to deal with the attacks which the Russians were launching across the ice, but these attacks could easily be countered by bombing the very vulnerable targets which were presented by the Russian columns advancing without cover across the open ice. More bombers were also required for attacking the Russian lines of communication in the Karelian Isthmus, where very telling damage could be inflicted. Above all, these bombers were needed to put heart into the Finns, without which there was grave danger that they might make peace at any moment. Major Magill had informed him that there were 3 Blenheim bombers in action with the Finns and 5 in the workshops, 2 having been lost in action. The remainder were apparently still on their way. He had brought back with him a complete statement of the ground facilities which the Finns possessed for the operation of additional aircraft.

THE MINISTER FOR CO-ORDINATION OF DEFENCE said that he had not any very up-to-date information of what aircraft had actually arrived in Finland, but the position so far as he knew it was as follows:-

Gladiators.

30 promised. All had arrived in Finland.

Gauntlets.

28 promised. 8 already shipped; none yet arrived in Finland. Manufacturers were supplying 2 a day to the packers.

Blenheims.

12 long-nosed and 12 short-nosed promised. 1 long-nosed Blenheim had been lost in transit and 1 delayed, for some unknown reason, in Sweden; 10 had arrived in Finland. 12 short-nosed Blenheims had reached Finland on the 27th February.

Lysanders.

17 promised. 9 already shipped; 6 had left by air, of which 2 had crashed en route. 2 more were due to leave by air on the 9th March,

Hurricanes.

12 promised. 11 had reached Sweden, one having crashed en route.

Rocs.

33 promised. 5 would go every four days by air, starting about the 9th March. A considerable quantity of bombs, spare parts and ancillary equipment was being sent at the same time as the aircraft.

The French were also sending 12 bombers, but it was understood that these could not fly direct from north Scotland and they would have to be shipped. The only way to get immediate assistance to the Finns seemed to be to send our own first-line aircraft over by air. They would have to be flown by R.A.F. personnel, either officially or in the guise of "volunteers". It was true that if we sent these aircraft, and some ground staff to accompany them, the ground staff might be lost for a long time if the Finns collapsed, but the aircraft could presumably be flown back and the machines themselves put into reserve.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that he did not think we should do any good by continuing to manoeuvre for position with Sweden and Finland. According to Brigadier Ling, Field Marshal Mannerheim felt that he had already made his appeal, though it was for bombers that he had asked as being his most urgent need. He thought that the right course was, therefore, to send some bombers immediately, and to waste no more time haggling with Sweden.

Continuing, the Foreign Secretary gave the War Cabinet an account of an interview which Sir Alexander Cadogan had just had with the French Ambassador, who had informed him that, according to information in the possession of the French, the Finns had started negotiations with the Russians, but would not accept the terms which the Russians had offered. They were not prepared to give up Viborg, but would be willing to cede Hango, which the Russians rented as a naval base. They would not continue their negotiations with the Russians after the 12th March, and if they could not get the terms for which they were standing out, would turn once more to the Allies for assistance. The Swedes were pressing the Finnish Government very hard to make peace, but when asked if they would guarantee Finland against Russia, if the Russian terms were accepted, they had refused.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR pointed out that so long as we kept our expedition all ready to sail to Scandinavia, we were less able to spare any material for Finland. If it was decided definitely to call the expedition off, we should probably be able to let the Finns have more material.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that there were two questions to be decided. First, what was to be done about the proposed expedition, and, secondly, what immediate assistance we could send to the Finns. He suggested that we should tell the Finns forthwith that they must make up their minds within, say, 24 hours, whether they were going to appeal to us for armed assistance. If no such appeal was received, we should cancel the expedition altogether. We might at the same time inform them what we could do in the way of immediate assistance. As to that, he himself was in favour of taking considerable risks and sending a substantial number of bombers, provided always, of course, that the Finns were not intending to give way to the Russians.

Considerable discussion then ensued as to what communication should be made to the Finns. The following were the principal points which emerged:

- (i) The Finnish Minister had been informed two days before that we could not take any decision about the despatch of additional aircraft until we received our appeal from the Finns. But it was agreed that the situation had now changed. The Swedes were clearly not going to allow our troops to pass through and any hope of bringing off the major project

was therefore receding.

(ii) If we made any mention in the communication of our willingness to send additional aircraft immediately, the Finns would be encouraged to press us for this form of assistance rather than for an Allied expedition which was, of course, essential to the carrying through of the main project of getting control of Galivare. The Finns probably had no intention of appealing for armed assistance, but were only hesitating to say so for fear of losing their chance of getting more aircraft.

(iii) It was suggested that it might be better to inform the Finns that we had now been waiting for some time to receive their answer; that this delay was very embarrassing to us; that we had therefore no option but to treat them as if they were not intending to appeal for Allied land forces, and that in these circumstances we now proposed that our assistance should take the form of sending bomber aircraft. It was felt, however, that it would be undesirable to give the Finns an opportunity for saying that we had withdrawn our offer of help.

(iv) The Finns were now being offered harsher terms by Russia than those which had led to the war in the first place. If we promised them additional bombers, this offer might well encourage them to hold out for better terms. We could not forbid them to come to terms of any kind, and we could not make our offer of bombers conditional on their not coming to terms with Russia. If Finland did come to terms with Russia, it might be possible to hold up at least some of the bombers before they had all been sent.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he would not have acceded to any request for the despatch of further fighters, since this would have meant a direct weakening of our own defences. Our bomber force on the other hand was only a deterrent to attack on this country. He therefore suggested that we might offer 50 bombers to the Finns.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR pointed out that to weaken our bomber force in this country might invite attack on us by the Germans. He would like to have an opportunity of consulting his technical advisers before coming to a final decision. Suppose that we sent these aircraft, and then after all the Finns collapsed a short time afterwards, we should have incurred grave risk to no purpose. He doubted whether, if the Finns managed to last out till April, they would then be able to hold on until July, during the period of the thaw. His own opinion was that the despatch of these aircraft would do nothing more than postpone the inevitable for about three weeks.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR said that Major Magill's report tended to confirm this view.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER pointed out that the offer of 50 bombers would make a very big difference in the presentation of our case to the world. The Swedes would no doubt try to make out that we were only serving our own selfish interests and had no real desire to assist the Finns at all. But if we now offered 50 bombers, which we could ill afford, after the Swedes had refused to allow us to send an expedition to help the Finns, it would be clear that we had done everything possible to aid Finland. This was an important political consideration, which must be balanced against the risk we were running in denuding our bomber force in this country.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO observed that if we sent bombers, we must expect further demands from the Finns for other material, such as artillery, which they would say was essential to enable them to continue the struggle.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR said that one of the main reasons why the Finns wanted aircraft was for counter-battery work. We had no artillery to spare which were suitable for this purpose.

THE PRIME MINISTER suggested that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the Secretary of State for Air and himself should draft a communication to the Finnish Government in the light of the discussion which had taken place.

The War Cabinet: -

- i) Agreed that authority should be given for the despatch of up to 50 bomber aircraft to Finland, subject to further consultation as to the technical problems involved, the arrangements necessary in regard to personnel, the dates of despatch, etc.
- (ii) Authorised the Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and Air, in consultation, to draft a telegram for despatch to Helsinki on the lines indicated in discussion;
 - (a) Asking for a definite answer within a specified period as to whether the Finns intended to issue an appeal for Allied land forces.
 - (b) Conveying to the Finns the promise of further air assistance as at (i) above.

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Source: British National Archives. WAR CABINET CONCLUSION: Minutes and papers: CAB/65/12/7.