

WAR CABINET 11 (40).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Saturday, January 13, 1940, at 11 A.M.

Present :

Admiral of the Fleet the Right Hon. LORD CHATFIELD, Minister for
Co-ordination of Defence (in the Chair).

The Right Hon. OLIVER STANLEY, M.P.
Secretary of State for War
(Designate)

The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD,
M.P., Secretary of State for Air.

The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY,
Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present:

General Sir W. EDMUND IRONSIDE
Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Air Marshal R. E. C. PIERSE, Deputy
Chief of the Air Staff.

Rear-Admiral T. S. V. PHILLIPS,
Deputy Chief of Naval Staff.

Secretariat.

Sir EDWARD BRIDGES.

Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.

Wing Commander W. ELLIOT.

Lieutenant-Colonel E.I.C. JACOB, R.E .

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3: *The Secretary of State for War* informed the War Cabinet that in the Karelian Isthmus no change had occurred in the general position. The Soviet troops had doubled the strength of their outposts, and the Finns were expecting to be attacked in the Eastern Sector. In the Sector immediately North of Lake Ladoga, the Finns were operating on Soviet soil everywhere except round Syskyjarvi and Suojarvi. The 18th Soviet Division near Syskyjarvi was practically cut off from its base, and was in danger of being surrounded. This Division had already suffered considerable loss and its morale was very low.

In the Centre Sector the Finns appeared to be consolidating their position on the frontier

East of Suomussalmi.

In the Northern Sector the Finns were making a counter-offensive towards Salla and had reached Saija and Kursu. They were hoping to outflank and surround all enemy forces West of Salla. There had been some reports that the Russians had been heavily reinforced in this Sector.

In the Petsamo area it appeared that a Soviet force of about one Infantry Regiment with some artillery and tanks had reached Hoyenjarvi, where it was being held up by two Finnish Companies. The nearest Finnish reinforcements were some 60 miles distant.

It was reported that the following Soviet reinforcements were expected before the end of the month :— .

For VII Army (Karelian Isthmus) —

Five regular Infantry Divisions from the Urals.

For VIII Army (Sector immediately North of Ladoga) —

The XVIII Corps of two or three regular divisions from the Far East.

The Russians were expected to renew their attacks in great force as soon as these reinforcements arrived.

The Finnish morale was said to be high, but the High Command was seriously worried by the lack of reserves of men, as well as by the shortage of munitions.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

4. *The Chief of the Imperial General Staff* informed the War Cabinet that Brigadier Ling had returned the previous day from his visit to Finland, where he had seen Field-Marshal Mannerheim. Brigadier Ling reported that the Finnish morale was still high. Their success had been due partly to their very skilful and superior tactics on skis (an art of which the Russians knew nothing), which had enabled them to surround the Russian columns and to cut their communications in the rear; and partly to the deplorable standard of Russian administrative and staff work, aggravated by the interference of Political Commissars.

Field-Marshal Mannerheim was of the opinion that the Finns would be attacked by the Russians in force in February or March, but that they would be able to hold out until May, when the snows would melt. They would then lose the advantage which they at present enjoyed through the possession of skiing troops. Even so, the Finns were confident that they could stop any Russian advance across the Karelian Isthmus. Further north, however, they were likely to be overwhelmed by superior numbers unless they obtained reinforcements of trained volunteers. The figure of 30,000 had been mentioned. It would be necessary that volunteers should not come as units of the British Army, since this would inevitably provoke the Germans to occupy Finland and Sweden. They would have to arrive in small bodies, made up ostensibly of private individuals, though Field-Marshal Mannerheim's idea was that they would, in fact, be trained members of our armed forces.

Meanwhile, the Finns were suffering most from a merciless and incessant bombing of their towns. Quite apart from the destruction of buildings, great suffering and hardship was caused by the breaking of windows and consequent loss of cover and warmth in temperatures well below zero. The actual number of people killed had been small. To meet these bombing attacks they had only a total of 30 Fighters, and very few anti-aircraft guns, almost all of which were with the Finnish army. Even with these limited numbers the Finns had brought down a prodigious number of Russian Bombers. Their immediate requirements, therefore, were for fighters and anti-aircraft guns. Generally speaking, Brigadier Ling agreed with the views expressed by Field-Marshal Mannerheim.

Field-Marshal Mannerheim's final observation had been that, if we could stop the supplies of oil from Baku reaching Russia, this would end the war against Finland.

The Minister for Co-ordination of Defence said that the Military Co-ordination Committee at their Meeting on the 3rd January had agreed that the Imperial Chemical Industries Limited should be authorised to supply to Finland 200 tons of cartridge cups and 20 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, provided Brigadier Ling's report showed that the need was urgent and that the Secretary of State for War was satisfied that they could reach Finland to be of value in the war against Russia. He suggested that Brigadier Ling's report, now justified the release of these supplies to Finland.

The Secretary of State for War agreed and said that he would make the necessary arrangements.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.