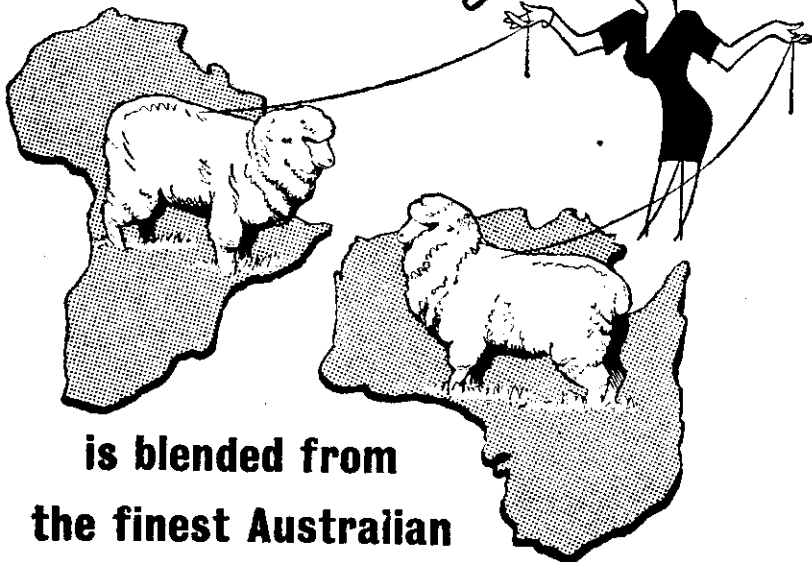


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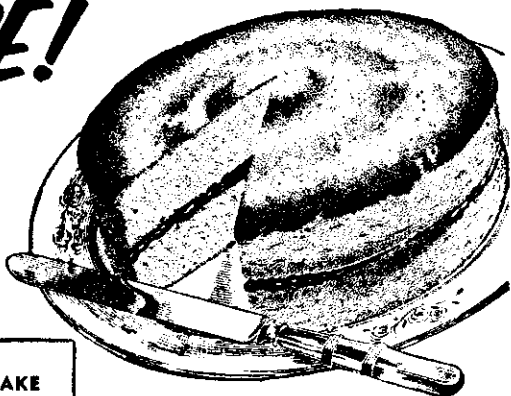


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News of a Distant Land

SEVEN talks were broadcast recently by Norris Collins, who visited Russia with a trade union delegation. Extracts from the talks, printed last week, showed that the speaker was a careful if untrained observer; and although, as he admitted himself, his tour was limited and supervised, he was able to gain useful impressions of Russian life. It was evident that he saw much which he, as a New Zealander, found strange and repugnant; but he also saw happy faces, healthy children, and an immense, controlled activity. The people, he was convinced, accepted the present régime. And, like people elsewhere, they wanted peace.

These impressions are not new. It is possible to read in many books of the social, political and industrial systems of Communist Russia. We have been told before that the people are fed ceaselessly on propaganda. It is common knowledge that our own standards of living are higher, that we have more freedom, and that congregations in Russian churches are middle-aged and elderly. Yet Mr. Collins's talks had their own special flavour and interest. They were given by a New Zealander who had "seen for himself"; they were addressed to listeners who would have made his own comparisons; and, perhaps most important of all, they were concerned with people and not with theories. Even then, Mr. Collins was aware of differences in outlook and method so wide that no way could be seen across them. "All these things," he said in his final talk, "emphasise to me the enormous gulf which keeps our peoples apart, and the stupendous efforts that are needed to bring us together. . . What a field for understanding, tolerance, patience!"

It is a field extremely difficult to explore. The Russians are sep-

arated from us by barriers of language and outlook. They cannot see the world's problems distinctly because they are allowed to hear of them only in a single and official version. Mr. Collins was soundly berated for asking if a library contained books which criticised the Soviet régime—an episode more revealing than a political treatise. This is the sort of thing which makes people say that the gulf can never be crossed. Yet is it wise, or even safe, to accept iron curtains as immutable facts of the contemporary scene? The curtains are not stationary. Communism is aggressive, and gains new footholds whenever men adopt its methods. One of these methods is to identify party or national policy with "demonstrated" truth. What the leaders say is true is true; and in place of the inquiring spirit there is a barren conformity. Men are halfway to this position when they adopt the stereotype of Russia the monster, the source of all evil; or are afraid to look for a nation instead of an effigy, lest they be accused of dangerous thoughts.

There are two alternatives: to accept Russia once and for all as the enemy, and to close our minds against her; or in our dealings with her to rely on the principles of inquiry and criticism which help us to be rational in the ordering of our own affairs. If the first course is followed, it seems inevitable that the second and better course will become harder to follow at home. The pursuit of truth is the strongest support of our free institutions. If it is abandoned on one front, it is weakened on others. There must now be nearly 200,000,000 Russians in the world; and somehow, in the shrinking space of the scientific age, we have to learn to live with them. We cannot do this by putting our heads in the sand.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 30, 1954.