

The Times 26 Oct 63
NEVER AGAIN?

The only really worthwhile question raised by the Czechoslovak "rehabilitation" of SLANSKY, CLEMENTIS, and others executed in 1952 is whether the Stalinist terroristic trials could come back again. One after another the present east European regimes have now denounced the Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Czechoslovak trials as strongly as westerners did while the wretched prisoners were in the dock. Most people who had to follow the series were quite clear that the charges of Titoism, Zionism, terrorism, and pro-western espionage were never meant to be believed. They were purposely exaggerated and were deliberately brought against the most unlikely victims—pillars of the regimes—in order to bring out the simple terrorist message that no one was safe. The nightmare—only one of many in a ghastly period—still hangs over people in the communist camp.

The Czechs, who were the last to stage their trials at STALIN'S bidding, have been the slowest to set aside the crazed judgments of those days, and their "rehabilitation" of the victims is characteristically carefully worded. Some of the men, like the former party secretary, SLANSKY, are now cleared of all the criminal charges for which they were executed but are said to have themselves been guilty of abuses of power. On that account they are not to be posthumously restored to party membership. Others, like the more liberal-minded CLEMENTIS, the former Foreign Minister, have apparently been cleared politically as well as legally. No doubt this broadly corresponds to the past. SLANSKY was a pocket Stalin, much rougher and tougher than CLEMENTIS. But the difference in their treatment now has also its expedient side. SLANSKY had few friends in Czechoslovakia when living, whereas CLEMENTIS was reasonably well liked and, more to the point, was a Slovak. SLANSKY'S death might strike a chill as a gross terrorist act; CLEMENTIS'S is still resented as a Czech act of repression against the Slovaks. Any dictatorial measure in Prague has always increased the Slovak national grievances and, as there is still tension between the Slovaks and the Czechs, it is surprising that the official announcement on the rehabilitations did not make more of CLEMENTIS'S full restoration.

Of course, like many other east European regimes, the Czechoslovak leaders are in a cleft stick. Many of them, including PRESIDENT NOVOTNY and the Prime Minister, MR. ŠIROKY, were among the seats of the mighty at the time of the trials. They are anxious to show up the evils of the old course in order to emphasize the newness of the new, but to stress the spotless record of the victims could easily increase the blame which they themselves share. Clearly no amount of rehabilitation of past victims, dead or alive, is in itself a guarantee that there can be no return to terrorism. Exposure may be a warning against a reversion, but no more than a warning. Nor is there a firm guarantee in what is often called the "new atmosphere", which is said to make a return unthinkable; it only makes a return more difficult, not impossible. The barriers against a return can be built up only gradually. The chief safeguard that comes from a free parliamentary society has to be ruled out, so long as the communists are on top. If there are to be any assurances they must come through a slow development in open justice, in the right of criticism, and in freedom in writing. Any one of these would mean more than denunciation of past nightmares.