

## When optimists should be shot

Contributed by Victor Tan Chen  
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“I am such a complete atheist that I am afraid God will punish me.” Such is the pithy wisdom of Jiřka Cimrman, the man overwhelmingly voted the “Greatest Czech of All Time” in a nationwide poll earlier this month. (A state TV station in the Czech Republic sponsored the survey, inspired by a hit BBC show that birthed similar “Greatest” polls across the continent.)

Who is Jiřka Cimrman? A philosopher? An inventor? An explorer? All of these things, yes, and much more. After a few days of investigation here in Prague, this is what I have uncovered:

Born in the middle of the 19th century to a Czech tailor and Austrian actress, Cimrman studied in Vienna and Prague, before starting off on his journeys around the world — traversing the Atlantic by steamboat, scaling mountains in Peru, trekking across the Arctic tundra. Astounding feats soon followed. Cimrman was the first to come within seven meters of the North Pole. He was the first to invent the light bulb (unfortunately, Edison beat him to the patent office by five minutes). It was he who suggested to the Americans the idea for a Panama Canal, though, as usual, he was never credited. Indeed, Cimrman surreptitiously advised many of the world’s greats — Eiffel on his tower, Einstein on his theories of relativity, Chekhov on his plays (you can’t just have two sisters, Cimrman is said to have said “how about three?”). In 1886, long before the world knew of Sartre or Camus, Cimrman was writing tracts like, “The Essence of the Existence,” which would become the foundation for his philosophy of “Cimrmanism,” also known as “Non-Existentialism.” (Its core premise: “Existence cannot not exist.”)

This man of unmatched genius would have been bestowed the honor of “Greatest Czech of All Time” if not for the bureaucratic narrow-mindedness of the poll’s sponsors, whose single objection to Cimrman’s candidacy was that “he’s not real.” (Jiřka Cimrman is the brainchild of two Czech humorists — Zdenek Sverak and Jiri Sebanek — who brought their patriotic Renaissance man to life in 1967 in a satirical radio play.) Thus, although Cimrman handily won the initial balloting in January, Czech TV officials refused to let him into the final rounds of the competition, blatantly biased against his non-existentialism.

How should we interpret the fact that Czechs would rather choose a fictitious character as their greatest countryman over any of their flesh-and-blood national heroes — Charles IV (the 14th-century Holy Roman Emperor who established Prague as the cultural and intellectual capital of Europe), Comenius (the 17th-century educator and writer considered one of the fathers of modern education), Jan Hus (the 15th-century religious reformer who challenged Catholic orthodoxy), or Martina Navratilova (someone who plays a sport with bright green balls)? The more cynically inclined — many Czechs among them — might point out that the Czech people have largely stayed behind their mountains for the past millennia, with little interest in, or influence on, happenings elsewhere in the world. Cimrman is so beloved because he is that most prickly of ironies: a Czech who was greater than all the world’s greats, but who for some hiccup of chance has never been recognized for his achievements.

Personally, I like to think that the vote for Cimrman says something about the country’s rousing enthusiasm for blowing raspberries in the face of authority. Throughout its history — from the times of the Czech kings who kept the German menace at bay through crafty diplomacy, to the days of Jan Hus and his questioning of the very legitimacy of the Catholic Church’s power, to the flashes of anti-communist revolt that at last came crashing down in 1989 during the Velvet Revolution — the Czechs have maintained a healthy disrespect for those who would tell them what is best or how to live their lives. Other countries soberly choose their “Greatest” from musty tomes of history, but the Czechs won’t play this game. Their vote for a fictional personage, says Cimrman’s co-creator Sverak, says two things about the Czech nation: “that it is skeptical about those who are major figures and those who are supposedly ‘the greatest.’” And that the only certainty that has saved the nation many times throughout history is its humour.

Cimrman — if he were with us today — would agree. A man of greatness, he was always a bit skeptical of those who saw themselves as great, or who marched forward under the banner of greatness. As Cimrman liked to say, “There are moments when optimists should be shot.”

—Victor Tan Chen