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To The Batmobile! The Catalan Car Designs of the 1930's

As a kid I was always fascinated by the Batmobile. It had a shape that defied convention and a shape that defied the normal aerodynamics of the car industry. Consequently, it was more than a car to me, it was a sexy, mean, defiant machine. But as I eventually disposed of my toys, and time took its weary toll on my childhood dreams, I stumbled across what possibly was the origin of the Batmobile. For whilst I was researching *The Forgotten Stories From Spain Series*, I kept coming across references to the 1936 collectivised factories of war torn Catalunya and it was there that I found the inspiration behind such a vehicle.



Read on...



As I'm not into military history - the thought of comparing tank wheels sizes or turret lengths frankly holds as much interest for me as the shaving habits of the current Spanish PM - I am however curious about what happened to Catalan Industry at the outbreak of the civil war. Not, I should add, because Industrial history is of particular interest - but for the following reasons:

- The mere fact that two anarchist organisations oversaw the production of war vehicles enabled a new and radical approach with energy and input from people not always within the engineering world. So for example, instead of someone specifically trained at say, 'Tank Design' getting the job of Tank Designer, it could just as easily go to Pepe the Bus Conductor because, well, he always quite fancied having a go. **The good thing about anarchist revolutions is that they are rarely boring and you always get a chance to try your hand at something new.**
- Secondly, the lack of raw materials during war and the limited finances coming from Madrid, meant that the production process

had to be customised. Hence the need for the Pepe's of the world to step forward .

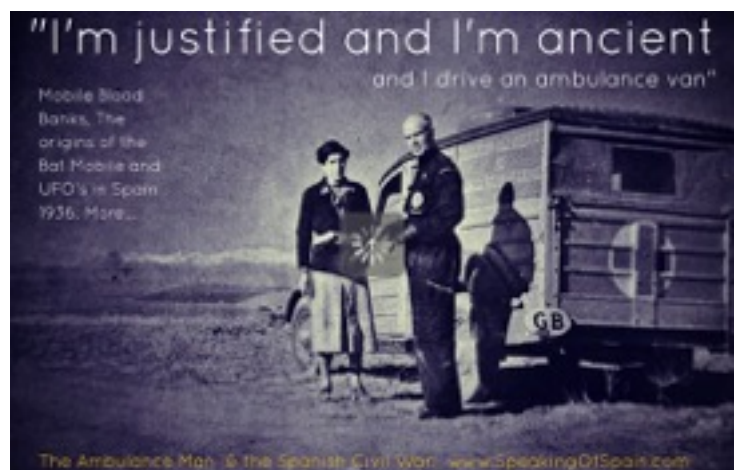
- Finally, on a purely political level, there are just not many examples in the history of the human race whereby people have actively embraced anarchism in industry at a time of war. And whereas you may be forgiven for thinking that it would all be somewhat anarchic (in the negative popular press sense), in fact it turned out quite the opposite.



"I'm Justified and I'm Ancient and I drive an Ambulance Van"

Between August 1936 and January 1939 many factories were collectivised in Catalunya by the workers of the CNT and the FAI, (*Confederacin Nacional de Trabajadores and Federacin Anarquista Iberica*) including one particular large complex:

The Maquinaria Moderna para Construcciones y Obras Públicas de Sant Sadurní. Vehicle adaptation and experimentation then became synonymous with the industrial north and in particular, Barcelona.

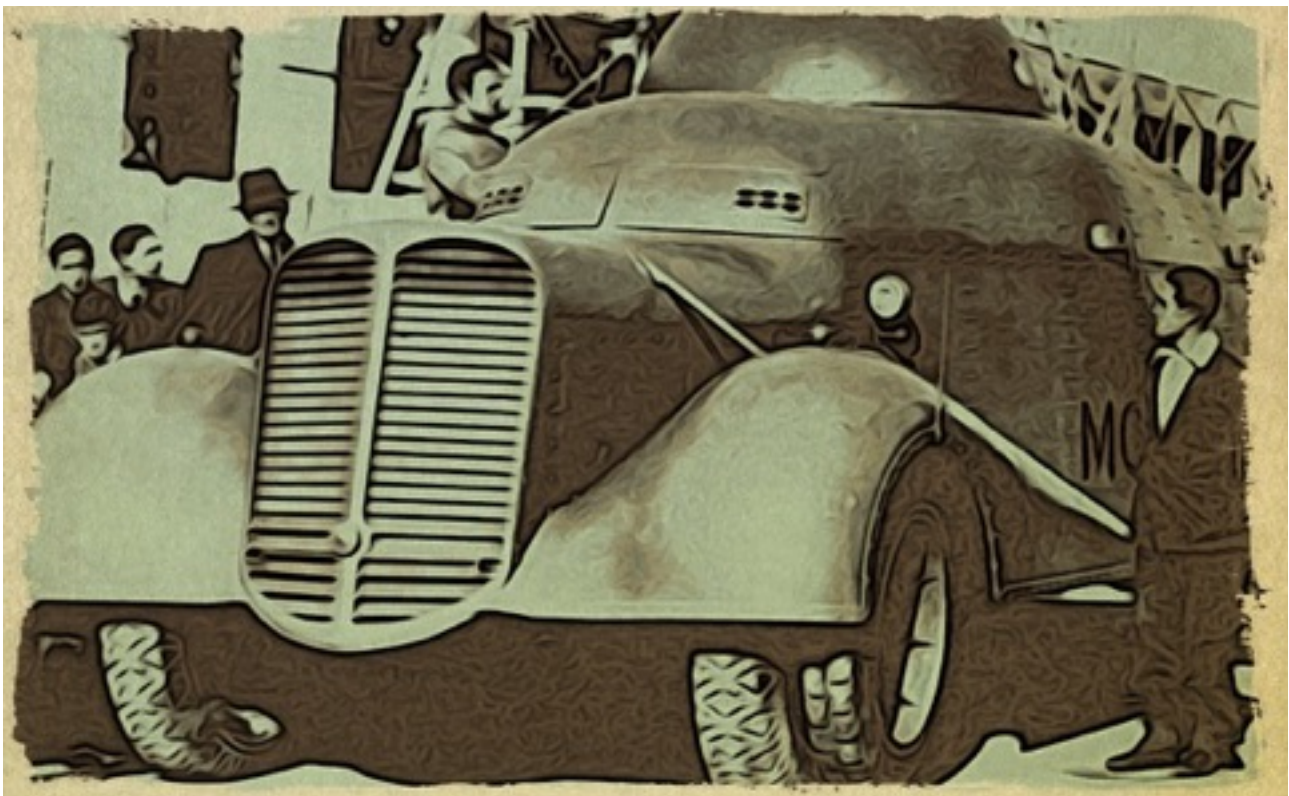


I know where the beat is at,
'cos I know what time it is
Bring home a dime,
Make mine a "99"

New style, meanwhile, always on a mission while
Fishing in the rivers of life
Fishing in the rivers of life (hoi)
Fishing in the rivers of life (hoi)
Fishing in the rivers
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Between August 1936 and January 1939 many factories were collectivised in Catalunya by the workers of the CNT and the FAI, (*Confederacin Nacional de Trabajadores and Federacin Anarquista Iberica*) including one particular large complex: **The Maquinaria Moderna para Construcciones y Obras Públicas de Sant Sadurní**. Vehicle adaptation and experimentation then became synonymous with the industrial north and in particular, Barcelona. Even [Norman Bethune, the Canadian Doctor](#) drove up to the province in search of a customised van to embark on his idea for a **mobile ambulance**. Other collectivised factories in Catalunya produced bombs, pistols, shells, grenades and dynamite. This car workshop, however, was converted into a huge factory for the production of tanks, assault vehicles, tractors, artillery and wacky shaped armoured cars.



Factory Z: All Bound For Mu Mu Land

Factory Z - as the new workshop came to be called - worked frenetically to produce the machines necessary for the defence of the

Republic and the Revolution in Catalunya. At its peak, every day consisted of three shifts: From 5am to midday, then from 1pm to 9pm, and finally from 9 - 5am.

But why didn't Spain just buy weapons and armoured vehicles? It had plenty of gold in it's reserves?

When the Civil War broke out, the legitimate Spanish Republican Government found itself having to defend its people against an armed, professionally trained and ruthless rebellious army. It needed to defend itself but was prevented from buying weapons from neighbouring countries by the Non-Intervention Pact (supported by the self-interest of Britain, France and the USA). In effect Spain was isolated and left with little choice. In Catalunya, the people acted quickly and decisively: Factories were collectivised and converted into weapons production lines, particularly the larger factories including the car industries owned by GM and Ford.

Design in the factory had not limitations. Chevrolet lorry or trucks were converted into armoured cars, a tractor would be re-designed to clear roads or snow. But it was the design of other vehicles, modified and customised in these factories that would become the template for Batman and Robins future transport needs.

Design and Innovation: Fishing in the Rivers of Life (hoi)

It was not just the design of the vehicles that proved groundbreaking, but in their construction too. One ingenious design involved using sheets of wool removed from old



mattresses. These were then stuffed between two metal plates. In theory, this meant that when an enemy projectile penetrated the first metal plate, its spinning nature meant that it would get caught up in the fibres of the wool and become entangled, preventing it from reaching the second defensive plate. Unfortunately the use of two metal sheets meant the vehicle then weighed too much to move very far at all. However, the idea was theoretically sound as a defence against small arms fire, and an example of innovative processes released when collective groups work together for reasons other than market share.

The Last Train Left an Hour Ago...

Finally, on the 10th January 1939 the Factory fell into the hands of the *Franquistas*. What could be removed was done so before hand, but much was left for the Nationalist troops to pour over and digest. What Franco found delighted him. He was like a small child with a new lego set for Xmas. Unbeknown to the rest of the world, this fanatical crusader was setting up a role model for a future caped crusader, one like Franco who liked building with lego.

Franco was prepared to use his new powers to control and create a new society. His consistent use of violence and repression only escalated inequality and he respected neither privacy, laws of human dignity or international legal rights. In short he used force to create a world compliant with his own world view. And in so doing, paved the way for other **Dark Knights** to follow.



Still, the crazy designs of the anarchist collective in Barcelona proved themselves light years ahead of the traditional Mu Mu car industry. Not until the 90's (Make mine a 99!) would we see the small personal combat vehicles/4X4 suzuki style designs hit the side-walks of bored urban-bound dreamers. But these designs were first on show back in the 1930's in the justified and ancient, anarchic and creative energy driven times of revolutionary Spain.

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