CHAPTER VI

THE AXIS BECOMES A TRIANGLE

The anti-Comintern association had not been conceived as the exclusive instrument of just two powers. The specific collaboration between Germany and Japan found its embodiment rather in the secret treaty than the published understanding. Since the ideological agreement contained implicit opposition to the League of Nations, it was understandable that the original signers hoped to enlist other members in their anti-Geneva front. Documentary sources, published since the war, have revealed that the anti-Comintern states at one time considered such countries as Poland and Brazil as likely prospects. Smaller nations like Hungary, Spain, and Manchukuo were eventually invited to join the agreement. But the main interest centered on more “dynamic” states, and in this category Italy was featured as a prominent candidate. After signing the 1936 agreement in Berlin, von Ribbentrop had repeatedly mentioned Italy, where the Duce would “hoist the anti-Bolshevist banner in the South.” 1 Most contemporary observers expected her to side with the coalition; as background to that event Italian relations with the Far East will first be sketched in brief.

In her East Asian affairs, Italy experienced after 1935 diplomatic changes similar to those in Europe. Her interests in that part of the world were not very important, but since the early 1930’s Mussolini had made obvious attempts to increase Italian influence in China. This effort had emphasized her national prestige, not economic privilege; thus Italy aided China with the revision of her penal code, and a former Minister of Finance participated in her currency reforms. An Italian air mission, headed by General Lordi, arrived in the Far East sometime in 1933 to undertake the training of the Chinese air force. It was stationed in Kiangsi Province and enjoyed from the outset an avowed military status. Later on, plans even existed for the construction and operation of an Italian aircraft factory in China.2 These measures were really directed against the

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Japanese position in China, and did not fail to evoke a response. The Japanese opposed such activities, and the Amau statement in 1934 contained a sharp protest against supplying China with war planes, building airfields, and training her air force.

Italian relations with Japan had, on the whole, been correct. But in the early 1930’s, when both countries pursued a policy of expansion, their interests began to clash in two specific places. While one of these was China, the other concerned Abyssinia. In her search for new outlets, Japan had entered the East African market and concluded a commercial treaty with Ethiopia. This irked Mussolini who had marked the area as his special preserve. Italian propaganda began to picture her activity as Asian imperialism, and alleged that the Japanese were building airfields in East Africa. The Duce himself, on at least one occasion, attempted “to make the flesh of Europe creep by evoking the spectre of the ‘Yellow Peril’. ”

But this only produced a protest in Tokyo. The Gaimushō pointed out that this unfriendly attitude seemed particularly misplaced in view of the admiration with which the Duce had always been regarded in Japanese circles. When the conflict with Abyssinia drew closer, tension increased between the two countries. The Italian press during 1934–’35 evinced its anti-Japanese feelings, while tempers in Tokyo waxed hot over Italian accusations and her evident Ethiopian aspirations.

With the growth of this controversy, Japanese public opinion became decidedly hostile toward Italy. Japan was not only chagrined by the possible loss of her East African market, but she felt some racial sympathy for the threatened Ethiopians. Nevertheless, her agitation against “white imperialism” did not foreshadow real danger in this instance. The Japanese government was shrewd enough to realize that its international position did not allow a conflict with Fascist Italy. A détente was apparently initiated in Tokyo, for on July 15, 1935, the Japanese Ambassador in Rome paid a visit to the Duce. Following his call, the Italian News Agency released the following statement:

The Duce has received the Japanese Ambassador, who, on instructions from his government, declared formally that Japan does not have any intention

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