Term applied to Germany and Italy after they signed the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936. It included Japan after it joined them in the Tripartite Pact (September 1940). Other states that joined the Axis were Hungary and Romania (1940) and Bulgaria (1941).

Alliance of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy before and during World War II. The Rome–Berlin Axis was formed in 1936, when Italy was being threatened with sanctions because of its invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia). It became a full military and political alliance in May 1939. A ten-year alliance between Germany, Italy, and Japan (Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis) was signed in September 1940 and was subsequently joined by Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and the puppet states of Slovakia and Croatia. The Axis collapsed with the fall of Mussolini and the surrender of Italy in 1943 and Germany and Japan in 1945.

Italy and Germany were both led by fascist dictatorships, so the two nations had common political ideologies, and were drawn to each other as allies. Both nations wished to expand their territories and were able to support each other’s claims. Germany helped Italy to break the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations for Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. Germany had left the League of Nations in 1933, and was more interested in helping its Axis ally than the aims of the League. The Axis joined forces to help fellow fascist leader General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).

Although Japan was not a fascist power, its expansionist policies, and suppression of other peoples in China and Korea made it a suitable ally for fascist Germany and Italy. Just as in Italy and Germany, the Japanese government was totally dominated by the military and military concerns. General Hideki Tōjō, prime minister of Japan from 1941, negotiated the tripartite Axis agreement in 1940 while minister for war. Hitler may have been a politician, but he was also a military ruler, while Mussolini usually appeared in military uniform. The three Axis powers formed an aggressive alliance to support their military campaigns. With the Japanese fighting the British in Asia, the three Axis allies had a common enemy as well.