The Soviet Union, too, was an especially weak great power in the fifteen years after World War I, which explains in good part why Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union cooperated extensively with each other before 1933.[88] Soviet leaders faced many problems in the 1920s as they tried to rebuild after the destruction wrought by World War I, revolution, civil war, and a lost war against Poland. But the chief problem they faced was their backward economy, which could not support a first-class military establishment. Josef Stalin initiated a major modernization program in 1928 to rectify this problem. It eventually worked, but the fruits of his ruthless industrialization policy were realized only after the Nazis came to power. The United Kingdom maintained a small army in the 1920s that was probably more concerned with fighting in the British Empire than on the European continent. Italy, which had been under Benito Mussolini's rule since 1922, was the weakest great power in Europe.

European leaders realized soon after Hitler took the reins of power that Germany would throw off the shackles of Versailles and attempt to alter the balance of power in its favor. But how quickly Hitler would move, in what directions he would move, and just how aggressive Nazi Germany would be were not clear during his first five years in power. Unlike contemporary students of international relations, Hitler's counterparts across Europe did not have the benefit of hindsight. The picture began to come into focus in 1938, first when he incorporated Austria into the Third Reich, and then when he forced the United Kingdom and France to let him take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. It became crystal clear in 1939. In March 1939, the Wehrmacht conquered all of Czechoslovakia, the first time that Nazi Germany had acquired territory that was not heavily populated with ethnic Germans. Six months later, in September, the Nazis attacked Poland and started World War II. Less than a year later, in May 1940, Hitler invaded France, and a little over a year after that, in June 1941, he sent the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union.

The same three states that worked to contain Wilhelmine Germany before 1914—the United Kingdom, France, and Russia—were Nazi Germany's principal rivals between 1933 and 1941. Although the cast of characters was essentially unchanged, Hitler's opponents mainly buck-

passed among each other in the face of the Third Reich's aggressive behavior, rather than forming a balancing coalition, as their predecessors had.

The Strategic Behavior of the Great Powers

Hitler was not in a good position to act aggressively on the foreign policy front during his early years in office. He first had to consolidate his political position at home and revitalize the German economy. Moreover, the German military he inherited was in no shape to fight a major war anytime soon. Consider that the mobilized German army that went to war in 1914 was composed of 2.15 million soldiers and 102 divisions.[89] The 1933 version of that army had a little over 100,000 soldiers and 7 infantry divisions. Hitler and his generals, however, were determined to rectify that problem by overthrowing the Versailles Treaty and building a formidable military instrument. Still, it took about six years to achieve that goal.

Three major building plans underpinned the growth of the German army.[90] In December 1933, Hitler mandated that the peacetime strength of the army be increased threefold, to 300,000 soldiers and 21 infantry divisions. New reserve units were also to be created, so that the fully mobilized field army would have 63 divisions. In March 1935, a new law stipulated that the peacetime army would grow to 700,000 with 36 infantry divisions. Conscription was introduced at the same time, although it did not go into effect until October 1, 1935, the same month that Hitler decided to build 3 panzer divisons in addition to the 36 infantry divisions. The projected size of the field army, however, remained "practically unchanged at 63 to 73" divisions.[91] Finally, the August 1936 Rearmament Program called for building a peacetime army of 830,000 with roughly 44 divisions by October 1940. The fully mobilized field army was to comprise 4.62 million soldiers and 102 divisions. When World War II started on September 1, 1939, the German army contained 3.74 million soldiers and 103 divisions.

Hitler also pushed to create a powerful navy and air force during the 1930s.[92] The development of the German navy was rather haphazard and unimpressive, but the building of the Luftwaffe was a different story. Germany had no combat-ready air squadrons when Hitler took office in