

but the Anschluss and Munich had delivered the death blow to France's already weak alliance system in eastern Europe. The United Kingdom finally abandoned buck-passing and formed a balancing coalition with France in March 1939, shortly after Hitler conquered Czechoslovakia.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the United Kingdom began racing to build an army to fight in France in the event of war. The United Kingdom showed a modicum of interest in forging an alliance with the Soviet Union but ultimately found no basis for resurrecting the Triple Entente.<sup>98</sup>

The United Kingdom and France declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939, two days after the Wehrmacht invaded Poland. But they did not fight against the German army until the spring of 1940, when Hitler struck in the west and knocked France out of the war. By the summer of 1940, a badly weakened United Kingdom stood alone against Nazi Germany. British leaders tried to form a balancing coalition with the Soviet Union against Hitler, but they failed, mainly because Stalin continued to pursue a buck-passing strategy. He hoped to see the United Kingdom and Germany engage in a long war, while the Soviet Union stayed out of the fighting.<sup>99</sup> The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union finally came together in an alliance after the Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941.

France, too, was committed to buck-passing.<sup>100</sup> During the 1920s, well before Hitler came to power, France formed alliances with some of the small states in eastern Europe for the purpose of containing a future German threat. Those alliances remained in place after 1933, which might seem to indicate that France was not buck-passing but was committed to building a balancing coalition against Nazi Germany. In reality, however, those alliances were largely moribund by the mid-1930s, in good part because France had no intention of coming to the aid of its allies, as it demonstrated when it abandoned Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, France hoped to push Hitler eastward, where it hoped the Wehrmacht would get bogged down in a war in eastern Europe or maybe even the Soviet Union. "France's military policy," as Arnold Wolfers notes, "tends to prove that, notwithstanding her far-flung commitments on the Vistula and the Danube, she was more concerned about receiving than

about giving support, more preoccupied with the defense of her own soil than with the protection of small countries."<sup>102</sup>

To encourage Hitler to strike first in the East, French leaders went to some lengths during the 1930s to foster good relations with the Third Reich. That policy remained in place even after Munich.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, France made no serious effort to form a balancing coalition with the Soviet Union. Geography certainly worked against that alliance (see Map 8.3). The Soviet Union did not share a common border with Germany, which meant that in the event of a Wehrmacht attack against France, the Red Army would have to move through Poland to strike at Germany. Not surprisingly, Poland was categorically opposed to that idea.<sup>104</sup> More generally, a Franco-Soviet alliance would have alienated the minor powers in eastern Europe, since they tended to fear the Soviet Union more than Germany, and it probably would have caused them to ally with Hitler, which would have undermined France's buck-passing strategy.

France was also discouraged from approaching the Soviet Union by concern that a Franco-Soviet alliance would ruin any chance that the United Kingdom might join forces with France against Nazi Germany. Not only were most British leaders hostile to the Soviet Union because they despised and feared communism, but if France had a reliable Soviet ally, it would not need the United Kingdom, which would then be free to continue buck-passing to France.<sup>105</sup> Finally, France did not form an alliance with Stalin because French leaders sought to encourage Hitler to strike first against the Soviet Union rather than France, and in the event that that happened, they had no intention of coming to the aid of Moscow. In short, France was buck-passing to the Soviet Union as well as to the smaller states of eastern Europe.

France's interest in passing the buck to the Soviet Union was reinforced by the widespread belief that Stalin was trying to buck-pass to France, which many French policymakers took as evidence that the Soviets were unreliable alliance partners.<sup>106</sup> Of course, many Soviet policymakers recognized what the French were up to, which just reinforced Stalin's interest in buck-passing, which, in turn, confirmed French suspicions that the Soviets were buck-passing to them.<sup>107</sup> As a consequence of all these fac-