Since the public records became available to historians at the end of the 1960s, judgements of Neville Chamberlain and his associates have become steadily more benign. In the circumstances he found, scholars suggest, he managed public affairs as well as anyone could have done. Yet the sequel to his work was a disaster. In 1940 Germany conquered France and directly imperilled the United Kingdom. From 1941 a great army struggle decided whether Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union under Stalin should be the greatest power on the European continent: an unappetising prospect whoever won. […] Moderation in the exercise of German military and industrial power was the object; the method was considerate politeness and the search for negotiated solutions to German grievances. Chamberlain hoped to persuade the Third Reich to limit its aims and to pursue them peacefully. He gave persuasion priority over coercion. Whenever the British government had to decide between resistance to German ambitions and compromise with them, Chamberlain led the way to compromise. Until 1938 this made him a vigorous exponent of a line of action favoured by ministers, officials, MPs and outside opinion. […] After the Anschluss in March 1938 Chamberlain could, the evidence suggests, have secured sufficient support in Britain for a close alliance with France and a policy of containing and encircling Germany, more or less shrouded under the League covenant. After Munich, it appears that it would have been politically easier for him to abandon appeasement, and to treat the Munich settlement, as many historians incorrectly claim he did, only as a means of deferring, rather than avoiding, an eventual confrontation of the Third Reich. He could even perhaps have denied Churchill the increase in political prestige that his denunciation of Munich eventually won for him. He did not do so and, on the contrary, expectantly awaited the negotiation with Nazi Germany of a definitive détente. Even after the German occupation of Prague in March 1939 he futilely tried to keep alive such hopes. These hopes rested on a reasonable but incorrect interpretation of the way the Third Reich worked. Hitler, this view assumed, must be interested in keeping power and the policies that set off the Second World War did not seem a sound method; if he were foolish enough to follow them, however, sensible Germans would stop him. The Chamberlainites relied on sympathetic treatment of German grievances to win Hitler, or failing him, influential Germans, to peaceful ways. They did not succeed for, it seems, their conduct strengthened both Hitler’s ambitions and his internal authority. A linked error loomed large: western association with the USSR would annoy and provoke, rather than restrain, the Nazis and non-Nazi Germans. Chamberlain, therefore, shunned co-operation with the Soviet Union on any terms and tried to prevent it. Another mistake was his assumption that the USSR and Nazi Germany could never combine, so that he thought some approximate balance of power existed in Europe without any British effort to secure it. […] This book suggests that Chamberlain led the government in 1938 and
1939, particularly in the months after Munich, into rejecting the option of a close Franco-British alliance, which might have dealt firmly with Mussolini’s pretensions, and might have acted as a nucleus round which those states with reason to fear the Third Reich could assemble to resist it. We still do not know whether or not it was possible to induce the Soviet Union to hinder rather than to help Hitler’s attempt in 1939 and 1940 forcibly to prevent the western powers from interfering in eastern Europe. Chamberlain refused to try; he thought collaboration with the Soviet Union undesirable and unnecessary. Yet Chamberlain had no intention of agreeing to a free hand for Germany in eastern Europe. This book suggests that he could have tried to build a barrier to Hitler’s expansion. After March 1939 British attempts to do so were either half-hearted or too late. […] Led by Chamberlain, the government rejected effective deterrence. Chamberlain’s powerful, obstinate personality and his skill in debate probably stifled serious chances of preventing the Second World War.