Why was Hitler invited to become Chancellor?

You have already investigated the strengths and weaknesses of the Weimar Constitution (see page 21). In 1932 the weaknesses of the constitution were clear to all. Because of its careful balance of power and proportional representation, no political leader was strong enough to rule. During this period Germany was effectively being run by 84-year-old President Hindenburg. He was a relic from the past. Policy was being set by a tiny group of rich, conservative industrialists and army leaders. The Reichstag offered very little leadership.

Overview
You are going to study the events of 1932 and 1933 in some detail, so it is important to get the overview first. At the heart of the problem was the fact that the Nazis were the largest party. Normally the leader of such a party would become Chancellor, but the other parties in the Reichstag would not work with Hitler. The constitution gave President Hindenburg the right to appoint the Chancellor and he did not want Hitler as Chancellor. So month after month there were arguments and back-room deals as different politicians struggled to assemble a workable government. The weakness of the Reichstag would have been a problem even if things had been going well in Germany. But when faced with the chronic problems of the Depression it was disastrous.

As you study the twists and turns of 1932–33, these are the main characters you will meet.

Reichstag elections: July 1932
In the July 1932 elections the Nazis won 373 per cent of the vote (250 seats) – their best result ever. They were now by far the largest party. Hitler demanded to be appointed Chancellor. Hindenburg despised Hitler, but he could see the value of trying to use the Nazis for his own ends. Hindenburg appointed Franz von Papen as his Chancellor. Von Papen had no support in the Reichstag but he hoped he could create a right-wing coalition government with the support of the Nazis and other right-wing parties in the Reichstag. Hitler refused to co-operate, so Hindenburg called another election.

Reichstag elections: November 1932
This was a bad election for the Nazis. Apathy was settling in.

In Northern the Nazis were in financial trouble and made a public appeal for party funds. In an attempt to regain support, the SA and leading Nazis went to church en masse and got a Protestant minister to speak for them. They placed advertisements in the local newspapers and mobilised all sections of the party to distribute leaflets and tickets to meetings. All this activity was in vain, however – the Nazis lost 267 votes in the town.

In Germany as a whole, the thuggery and intimidation by the SA had begun to lose the Nazis support. Their vote fell to 55.1 per cent. They lost 54 seats. They were still the largest party but there was a real sense of gloom among the Nazis. After years of continuous campaigning they were running short of money. Goebbels wrote in his diary: ‘the future looks dark and gloomy; all chances and hopes have quite disappeared.’

In fact, success was just around the corner. Hitler’s help came from a surprising source. General von Schleicher stopped supporting von Papen and decided he himself should become Chancellor. This triggered off a power struggle between von Schleicher and von Papen, which ended with them handing power to Hitler. This is how it happened:

1932
3 December: Hindenburg (reluctantly) appoints von Schleicher Chancellor.

1933
4 January: Von Papen can see that von Schleicher is having difficulty keeping a Reichstag majority. He sees his chance to win back power. He privately agrees to work with Hitler. Hitler will be Chancellor. Von Papen will be in the Cabinet.

22 January: Von Papen asks Hindenburg to make Hitler Chancellor. Hindenburg refuses.

28 January: Von Schleicher finally has to admit defeat in raising support in the Reichstag. He has to resign.

50 January: Hindenburg wants von Papen back but is advised that reappointing such an unpopular Chancellor might trigger a movement against Hindenburg himself. Von Papen persuades Hindenburg that as long as the number of Nazis in the Cabinet is limited, then even with Hitler as Chancellor the most extreme Nazi policies could be resisted. He also warns that the alternative is a Nazi revolt and civil war.

Hindenburg appoints Hitler as Chancellor and von Papen as Vice-Chancellor.

Source: 1 An American cartoon from early 1933 with the caption ‘Not the most comfortable seat.’

Task
You are now going to write an essay on the subject ‘Why did Hitler become Chancellor in January 1933?’ Over pages 44–61 you have investigated different factors which contributed to this. They are summarised in the diagram opposite. Use each point in the diagram as the basis for one paragraph in your essay. In the final paragraph of your essay reach your own conclusions as to which factors were, in your opinion, most important.

Political manoeuvring between von Schleicher and von Papen (page 61)

The weaknesses of the Weimar government (page 49)

The Depression (pages 46–51)

Nazi tactics (pages 44–45 and 52–53)

His leadership skills (pages 51–53)