The Bolshevik seizure of power in October was the beginning rather than the end of the revolution. The Bolshevik government had a tenuous grip on power and some observers thought that it would survive only for a few weeks. Lenin found that running a government after the October Revolution was beset with problems. There was a great deal of opposition to one-party rule and the emerging Bolshevik dictatorship. The working classes in the cities supported soviet power but not necessarily Bolshevik power. Most people, including some leading Bolsheviks, expected a socialist coalition to emerge from the ruins of the discredited Provisional Government. But Lenin had always intended to rule alone and the Bolsheviks were prepared to be ruthless in establishing their power base. The newly elected Constituent Assembly posed a serious threat to the government, as did the knotty problem of reaching an acceptable peace settlement with Germany.

How did Lenin get his new government on its feet?

Lenin had proclaimed Soviet power but he did not exercise power through the Soviet. The Soviet could easily have become the main body of the government and many people expected it to be so. But Lenin formed an entirely new body - the Council of the People’s Commissars, or the SOVNARKOM. It was exclusively made up of Bolsheviks (although some left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries were invited to join later). The reason for this was clear: Lenin had no intention of sharing power with the Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and other socialist groups in the Soviet.

The government’s position was extremely precarious. Its power was strictly limited: many soviets and bodies as such as public safety committees were still in the control of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries or non-socialists, and in the countryside the Bolshevik presence was virtually non-existent. Even in the soviets controlled by the Bolsheviks, there was no guarantee that the central government could get is decisions carried out; some were a law unto themselves. All over the capital, civil servants mounted protest strikes and, even worse, the State Bank refused to hand over any money. It took ten days and armed force to make the bank staff open the vaults so that the government could get its hands on much needed roubles.

Lenin could not afford to ignore the tide of popular aspiration that had swept away Kerensky and the Provisional Government, so he gave the workers and peasants what they wanted. Power was thrown out to local soviets to manage their own affairs, even though at this stage they were not, in the main, under capital control. The Sovnarkom ruled by decree without going to the Soviet for approval. The early decrees were a compromise by the Bolsheviks to keep popular support.
What happened to the Soviet?

The passing of decrees by the Sovnarkom without seeking the approval of the Soviet was a clear breach of Soviet power. But Lenin had no intention of discussing his policy initiatives with non-Bolshevik socialists. Important measures, such as the initiation of peace talks, were passed without consulting the Soviet at all. The Soviet Executive began to meet less frequently, whereas the Sovnarkom met once or twice a day. As the main source of power the Soviet was a dead duck, although it continued to meet well into the 1930s. The local soviets did form the basis of the governmental structure in the Soviet Union but were increasingly dominated by the Communist Party.
How did the Bolsheviks deal with the threat from people who opposed them?

While one element of the Bolsheviks’ strategy was to go along with the popular demands, the other was to build its forces of terror and wipe out opposition. One of the first measures of the new Bolshevik regime was to close down the opposition press; first the newspapers of the centre and the right and later the socialist press. The Bolsheviks, who had pumped enormous amounts of money into their papers and periodicals during 1917, knew the problems that a hostile press could cause them.

Next, attention was turned to opposition political parties. The Kadet Party, which had done quite well in the Constituent Assembly elections was denounced and outlawed. Leading Kadets were arrested and two were brutally beaten to death by Bolshevik sailors. They were soon followed into prison by leading right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks - all this before the end of 1917. The engine of political terror was being cranked up.

On 7 December, Lenin set up the main instrument of terror - the Cheka, or Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage. This force of dedicated Bolshevik supporters provided dependable security, bringing units of the Red Guard and military units under its control. It soon proved itself an effective mechanism for dealing with any opposition.

Lenin actively encouraged class warfare as a means of intimidating the middle classes and terrorising them into submission. It started with attacks on the Kadets, as the leaders of the bourgeois counter-revolution, but the net soon widened. The legal system was abolished and replaced by revolutionary justice, which was arbitrary and violent in character. Anybody accused of being a burzhui (bourgeois) was liable to be arrested, and any well-dressed person found on the streets (including Bolshevik leaders until they could prove who they were) was at risk of being labelled a burzhui. Even if not arrested, burzhui could be beaten and robbed.

Lenin’s use of class warfare played well in Russia. Workers, soldiers and peasants supported the end of privilege and the moves to a more egalitarian society. The abolition of titles and the use of ‘comrade’ as the new form of address gave power and dignity to the once downtrodden. Workers and soldiers became more cocky and assertive, rude to their ‘social betters’. The socialist press encouraged the perception of the burzhui as the ‘enemies of the people’. They were condemned as ‘parasites’ and ‘bloodsuckers’. The state licensed and encouraged the elements in Russian society that did not need much encouragement to do this.

Striking civil servants, who were causing the emerging Bolshevik government so many problems, were arrested and the civil service was thoroughly purged. Junior officials willing to support the Bolsheviks were promoted and Bolshevik officials were brought in. Often third-rate people or corrupt opportunists were put into positions of real power. The bureaucracy that developed was of poor quality but it was obedient.

There was some opposition to the Bolsheviks and there were demonstrations. But the opposition was weak and uncoordinated. Mensheviks and right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries did not want to get involved in organised violence because they were still acutely aware of the dangers of civil war. Moreover, they still had hopes for the Constituent Assembly and an all-socialist government. They did not really expect the Bolsheviks to survive.

Who was a burzhui (bourgeois)?

This term did not apply only to the middle classes. It was a form of abuse used against employers, officers, landowners, priests, Jews, merchants or anybody seemingly well-to-do. It referred not so much to a class as to any internal enemy, whom workers and peasants blamed for their problems. It later became synonymous with people suspected of speculating or hoarding food.
How did Lenin deal with the threat posed to his government by other socialists?

There was enormous pressure on the Bolsheviks to form a democratic government representing all the socialist parties. Hundreds of resolutions and petitions flooded in from factory committees, army units, and Moscow and provincial towns, demanding that there be cooperation between the parties to avoid factional strife and civil war. People did not want to lose the gains of the revolution because the socialist parties were fighting amongst each other. They were in favour of Soviet power, not one-party rule.

The railwaymen's union, backed by the post and telegraph union, threatened to cut off communications if the Bolsheviks did not hold talks with other parties. The could paralyse food supplies to Petrograd as well as contact with other cities. This pressure forced Lenin, unwillingly, to send representatives to talks with other parties about a power sharing government. It also persuaded Lenin, again unwillingly, to allow the planned elections for the Constituent Assembly to go ahead at the end of November. The Bolsheviks knew that there would be an unstoppable backlash if they did not go ahead with the elections, particularly as before October they had attacked Kerensky for postponing them.

Quite a few leading Bolsheviks, including Kamenev and Zinoviev, were in favour of a socialist coalition government. They believed that an isolated Bolshevik Party would have to maintain itself by terror and would almost certainly be destroyed by the civil war that would inevitably follow. So they were happy to be involved in talks with other parties. It seems likely that they were duped by Lenin into thinking he was serious about a coalition, and they temporarily resigned when they found out he was not.

Lenin had always intended the Bolsheviks to rule alone and he engineered the collapse of the talks. He did, however, make an alliance with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and brought them as junior partners into the Sovnarkom. He saw this as useful because, with them in his government, he could claim to represent a large section of the peasantry. The Left Socialist Revolutionaries had, for some time, been closest to the Bolsheviks, particularly on the land issue; indeed they claimed, with justification, that Lenin had stolen this policy from them.

The Constituent Assembly posed a bigger threat to Lenin. Elected by the people in the first free elections in centuries, it could claim to be the legitimate body to decide the make-up of the future government of Russia. when the election results became known, the Bolsheviks found they had won only 175 seats against 410 for the Socialist Revolutionaries (including 40 Left SRs) and nearly 100 for other parties. However, Lenin asserted that this Soviet government represented a higher stage of democracy than an elected assembly containing different political parties. He said that the Constituent Assembly smacked of bourgeois parliamentary democracy and declared it redundant. The Assembly was allowed to meet for one day - 5 January 1918 - then the doors were closed and the deputies told to go home. A crowd which demonstrated in favour of the Assembly was fired on by soldiers loyal to the Sovnarkom, the first time that soldiers had fired in this way on unarmed demonstrators since February 1917.
How did Lenin deal with the problems posed by ending the war?

The promise that had brought so many people to the Bolshevik banner was the pledge to end the war. The Decree on Peace was signed on 26 October with a plea to other nations for a just peace with ‘no annexations, no indemnities’.

But the practical resolution proved more difficult. The Russian army at the Front disintegrated rapidly; the soldiers had no desire to die in futile last-minute fighting and wanted to get back home. This represented both good and bad news for the Bolsheviks. The good news was that the army could not be used against them by Russian generals. The bad news was that the German army was free to walk into Russia and take what it wanted. At the peace negotiations held at Brest-Litovsk, the German demands were excessive. Trotsky, the Bolshevik negotiator, withdrew from the negotiations saying that there would be ‘neither war nor peace’, meaning that the Russians would not fight the Germans but would sign the treaty either.

Lenin, however, knew that he had to have peace at any price to ensure the survival of the fledgling regime. Opposition to the war had been a key factor in the Bolshevik success in October and he had to honour his promise. Furthermore, there was now no army to fight the Germans, who began to advance into the Ukraine. Lenin even feared that they might move on Petrograd and throw him and his government out. Under pressure from Lenin, representatives of the Bolsheviks reluctantly signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918. Trotsky refused to go to the final meeting.

Consequences of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Signing the treaty had serious consequences for the Bolsheviks:
- Patriotic Russians were horrified by the terms. Giving away large chunks of the Russian homeland antagonised many Russians across the class and political spectrum and encouraged them to join anti-Bolshevik forces. It was anathema to the Kadets and conservative forces on the Right.
- It caused more splits in the Bolshevik Party. Bukharin and the left wing of the party wanted to prosecute a revolutionary war to encourage a European socialist revolution. Some thought the international revolution more important than the one in Russia. To them, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk seemed a shameful peace that helped Germany survive as an imperial power.
- The left wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries, who also wanted to fight a revolutionary war like the Left Bolsheviks, left the Sovnarkom in protest. The Bolsheviks were now really on their own.

All the opposition to Brest-Litovsk made civil war almost inevitable.