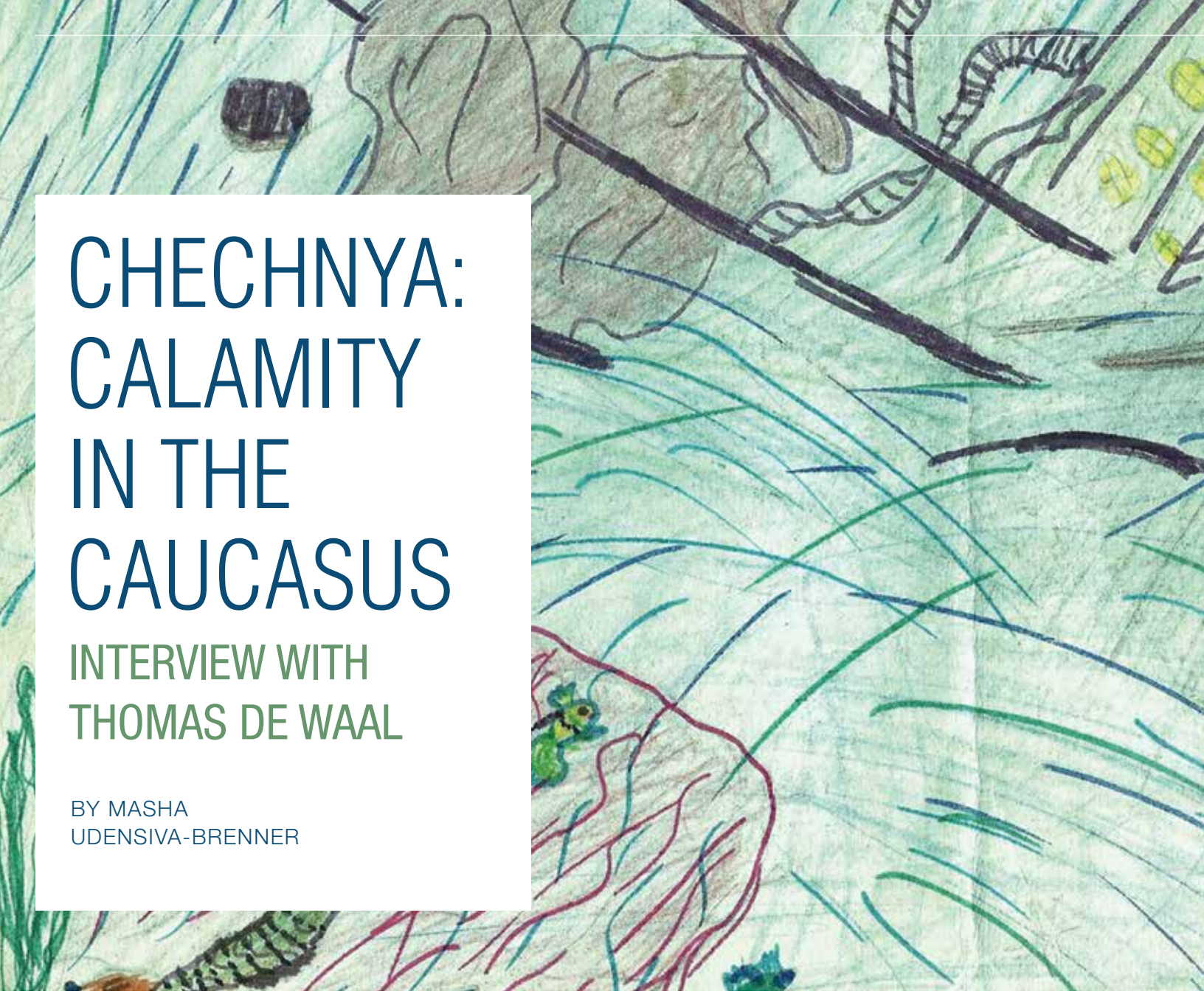


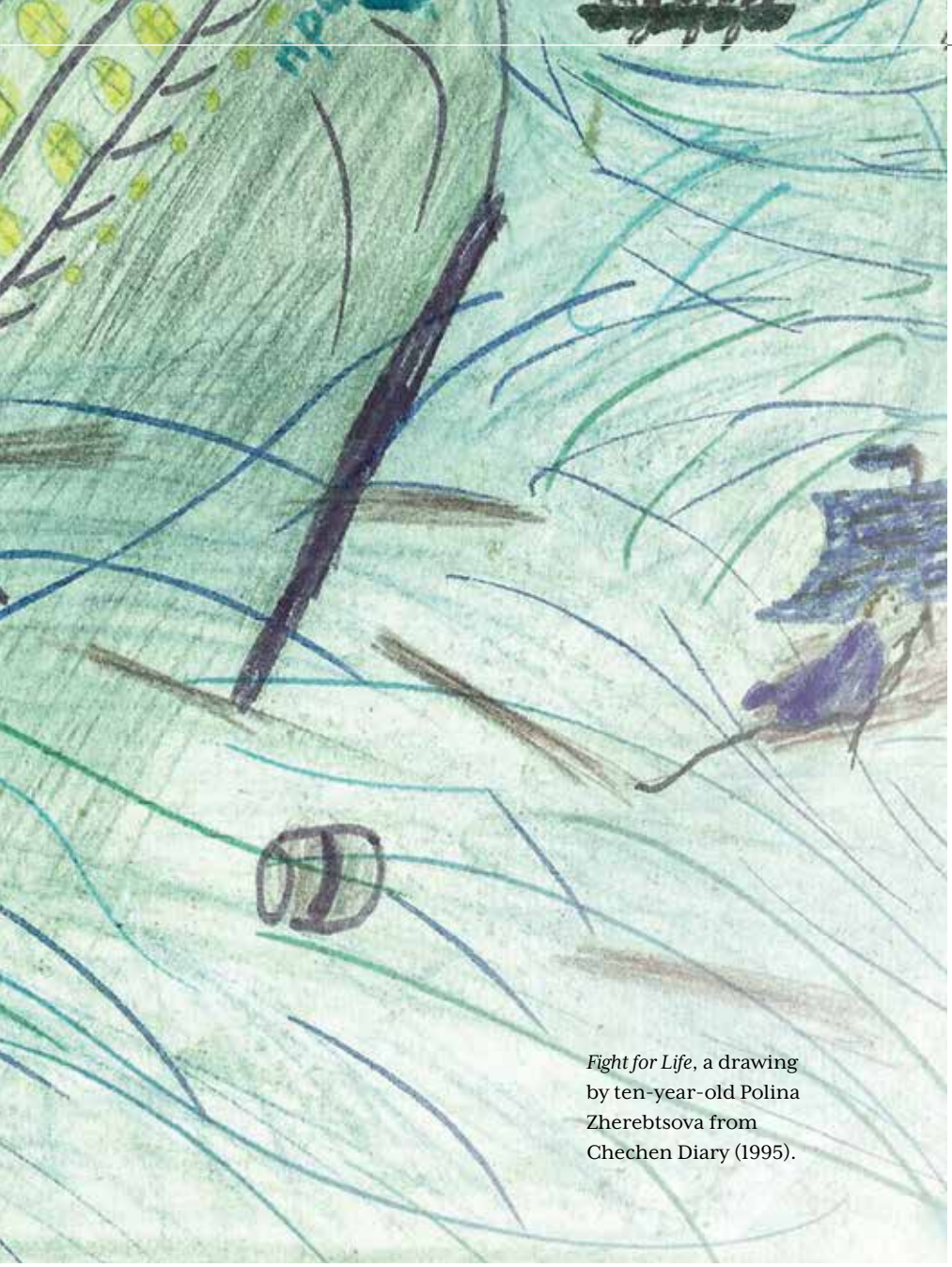
CHECHNYA: CALAMITY IN THE CAUCASUS

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS DE WAAL

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

Several years ago, the journalist and Carnegie Europe senior fellow Thomas de Waal approached the Harriman Institute with a proposal. In between house moves, he had discovered a box of tapes collecting dust in his attic. It contained all the interviews he had conducted for his first two books—*Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York University Press, 1998) and *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2003). De Waal had only used a fraction of each interview in the books, and he thought the tapes would be a valuable resource to scholars and journalists. Would the Harriman Institute be interested in housing the collection? Timothy Frye, director of the Institute at the time, eagerly agreed, and we embarked on the process of bringing the project to fruition—digitizing, transcribing, dealing with legal considerations. This year the Thomas de Waal Interviews Collection became available at Columbia Libraries.

I spoke with de Waal over Skype about both books last spring—an interview that will be published in two parts. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation on *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*. The book, coauthored with de Waal's former *Moscow Times* colleague Carlotta Gall, was the first ever to be published about the 1994–96 conflict in Chechnya. The authors' in-depth investigation of the conflict and its roots is crucial to understanding the Chechnya we see in the news today.



Fight for Life, a drawing by ten-year-old Polina Zherebtsova from Chechen Diary (1995).

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: The late Russian economist and politician Yegor Gaidar, whom you quote in the book, contended that, had the West intervened or put pressure on Russia in some way, the first Chechen war wouldn't have happened. What are your thoughts?

Thomas de Waal: I think that's the case. Now we're used to thinking of Chechnya as this frightening zone, a place [Ramzan] Kadyrov dominates, that could be an incubator of terrorism, has been an incubator of terrorism. And yet the trigger for all that was the military intervention in December 1994. And the West's reaction was pretty limp, considering that this was a massive war crime. The Western narrative at the time was all about supporting Yeltsin, supporting a pro-Western government. And, of course, supporting Russia's territorial integrity. Bill Clinton famously came to Moscow and strayed off script when asked about Chechnya. He hadn't been prepped on this and said that Abraham Lincoln fought a war to keep this country together, and so he understood Yeltsin's point of view.

But there are many different ways of achieving territorial integrity by peaceful means; you don't have to go to war. And the terrible paradox is—though this was supposedly a war to prove that Chechnya was part of Russia—the way the Russian army behaved was as though it was conquered enemy territory. Everything they did drove Chechnya away from Russia and Chechens away from Russians. If something like this had happened in the Balkans, everyone responsible would have been facing trial in The Hague. But because it was Russia, they got off. So Gaidar's point was that if the West had dealt more clearly, more forcefully, with Yeltsin just before the conflict started, and even at the beginning of the conflict, they could have reined him in, and the worst of this tragedy could have been avoided.

Udensiva-Brenner: Because Yeltsin still cared quite a bit about the West's opinion.

De Waal: He was still totally dependent on the West, on IMF [International Monetary Fund] credits; there was massive Western leverage with Yeltsin.

Udensiva-Brenner: Your book left me with the impression that a realignment in the Kremlin, after the more liberal politicians criticized Yeltsin for his drinking, indirectly led to this conflict.

Jokhar Dudayev mural on the fence of the Raszynska Social Gymnasium in Warsaw.

De Waal: That's right, and you could make an argument in that direction; it's slightly exaggerated, but you could make the argument. There was a famous incident where Yeltsin was in Berlin for a ceremony [in August 1994], when he was clearly drunk—a military band was playing, and he picked up the baton and started conducting the band. A group of his liberal advisers wrote to him afterward saying they disapproved of his behavior, a rather courageous thing for them to do. But it had the opposite effect from what they intended. Yeltsin was offended and shifted toward the more hawkish advisers, people like [Alexander] Korzhakov; and that group became dominant, and their views therefore influenced Yeltsin to go to war in Chechnya. So one could draw a kind of direct line between Yeltsin conducting the band drunkenly in Berlin and the decision to go to war in Chechnya.

Udensiva-Brenner: What were the machinations inside the Kremlin during the period leading up to the invasion?

De Waal: I did a lot of interviews to try to reconstruct a chronology of the decision and what followed. I interviewed Yuri Kalmykov, the one man at the Security Council meeting who spoke out against the conflict. The only person in the room who actually supported him was Yevgeny Primakov, which was interesting. He subsequently became Russian prime minister and is someone who was never really very popular in the West. When I was presenting the book, and said that Primakov opposed the war and the supposedly pro-Western Foreign Minister Kozyrev actively supported it, I confused a few Western audiences. So these categories of hawk and dove in Russia are not so clear cut. There was a lot of maneuvering within the Kremlin—hard-line advisers trying to persuade Yeltsin to go in, liberal advisers being much more cautious. But it wasn't a case of the good czar and the bad advisers; I think Yeltsin himself ultimately made the decision to start the war.

Udensiva-Brenner: What did he want to get out of it?

De Waal: At the time, Yeltsin was looking for new ways of boosting his own popularity, of legitimizing himself. [Vladimir] Zhirinovsky, the far-right extremist, had done well in the Duma elections of December '93. So I guess Yeltsin wanted to rebrand himself. Or, to be precise, people in the Kremlin, one group in the Kremlin, wanted to rebrand Yeltsin as the tough guy, the Russian nationalist.

These people were constantly bouncing the idea of a quick solution to the Chechen problem—a quick crushing of the Dudayev regime, which would successfully rebrand Yeltsin. And, hence, the title of our book in the original British version was *A Small Victorious War*. This is a phrase that goes back to the Russian-Japanese war of 1904, but was used by one of Yeltsin's advisers, Oleg Lobov, in a conversation I quote in the book. ["We need a small, victorious war to boost the President's ratings."] And they thought it would be over in a couple of days or a week—that the Dudayev regime would crumble and Yeltsin would score this political victory.

Crazy as it sounds, people at the Kremlin meeting, discussing this issue, brought up the example of Bill Clinton in Haiti: Bill Clinton had gone into Haiti, overthrown a military regime, and it all happened very quickly and had been a political success for him. Where do we begin? Chechnya isn't Haiti; it has all these historical grievances. Also, the one thing that was guaranteed to unite Chechens under [Jokhar] Dudayev was a Russian military invasion. Particularly when you consider the state of the Russian army, which was totally unprepared. It was not going to go into Chechnya in a disciplined way, enforcing law and order. On the contrary, it was a force of disorder and lawlessness.

Udensiva-Brenner: Why didn't the Kremlin wait a little while in order to prepare the army for the invasion, to organize their efforts?

De Waal: I don't think you could have done anything with the Russian army back in 1994. It was a conscript army. The economy had collapsed; the soldiers were underfed, badly clothed, badly equipped, poorly trained, no morale. One had to feel sorry for them being sent off to this region in the south. There were appalling levels of indiscipline, and let's not even talk about human rights abuses—just the looting. You saw these trucks heading out of Grozny full of furniture and possessions that Russian soldiers had been looting from supposedly Russian homes.

Udensiva-Brenner: And although Chechnya was technically Russian territory, no state of emergency was declared.

De Waal: It was definitely not thought through. This was a classic issue of the Yeltsin period, when Russia was basically a democracy with this very dysfunctional government. So, on the one hand you had the Russian army going in, supposedly to restore order; on the other hand you had huge unhappiness within the army about what was going on, some generals refusing to fight.

Udensiva-Brenner: And Russian troops, desperate for water and provisions, were actually prolonging the conflict by selling arms to the Chechen fighters . . .

De Waal: That's right. It was a reporter's dream reporting from Chechnya because pretty much every day—without even trying too hard, just by being around and talking to lots of people—you would come across the most extraordinary stories. One day in a village I met this guy; he said, "Let me show you something," and he took me into his house and showed me some weapons he'd bought off the Russians and a huge stack of dollars that he was going off with to buy some more weapons from the Russians. So one combatant in the conflict was actually selling its weapons to the enemy it was supposed to be fighting against.

Udensiva-Brenner: How pervasive was this?

De Waal: Very pervasive. Chechens would joke, "If you give me enough vodka, I can buy a tank." The morale was so much higher on the Chechen side; and most of the Russian army just didn't want to be there, didn't want to fight, and were doing things like selling their weapons.

Thomas de Waal

Zherebtsova (Chechen Diary, 1995).

Top to bottom: Chechen man prays during battle for Grozny (January 1995), photo by Mikhail Estafiev; Boris Yeltsin during his inauguration (1991); Zherebtsova (Chechen Diary, 1995).

Udensiva-Brenner: And not only was the army selling its weapons, but there were also high-level informers within the Russian government selling top secret information to Jokhar Dudayev, president of Chechnya at the time.

De Waal: That's right. Dudayev would enjoy telling Russians all the gossip he'd heard from inside the Kremlin. I never got to the bottom of that, but it was indicative of the state of Russia at the time. Our book is about Chechnya, but on a bigger level it's also about Yeltsin's Russia. You read these stories about it that describe market reforms, and [privatization minister Anatoly] Chubais, and so on, but in fact you had to get out to the edges of Russia to find out how dire the situation was in the '90s. And we don't necessarily blame Yeltsin; we blame the legacy of the Soviet Union, a collapsing state. But the corruption, the collapse of infrastructure, the low morale, the lack of belief in the state—that's basically what happened in Chechnya, too, to the most extreme degree.

Udensiva-Brenner: What role did the media play throughout the conflict?

De Waal: This was an extraordinary aspect of it. While the Kremlin was saying, "The operation is going smoothly to restore law and order," the new NTV channel was reporting from the ground, from Grozny, and showing these scenes of devastation, and lawlessness, and bombing, and the killing of ethnic Russians, which particularly enraged the Russian viewing public. You see, the Chechens who lived in Grozny could flee to their home villages, but the Russians had nowhere to go. A lot of them were pensioners, so they were disproportionally victimized by the artillery and the bombing of the Russian air force and died in great numbers. I would say that, when the war finally ended, it was largely because the Kremlin failed to control the narrative and the Russian population as a whole had stopped supporting it.

Udensiva-Brenner: Why didn't the Kremlin try to limit the press in some way?

De Waal: This was a Russia of lawlessness and freedom in which they didn't really have the tools, and, to be fair, even the will, to censor and suppress the press. Maybe they tried, but as I said, Russian NTV in particular, and some other TV and radio as well, were broadcasting pretty frequently. And as foreign press you could go down there and do whatever the hell you wanted. There wasn't really a front line, so you could pretty easily go back and forth between the Russian-controlled side and the Chechen rebel–controlled side on the same day. Chechnya's pretty small. You could go into the mountains and meet the Chechen rebels and the same evening be back on the Russian side. We roamed around pretty freely. It was a bit scary; sometimes you didn't know where you were. But it was amazing access. And the Chechen rebel side was incredibly good at PR. They wanted to use us, the foreign press, to get across their side of the story, and they were much more open than the Russian military were about talking to us—which of course meant that the reporting reflected their side of the story pretty well.

Udensiva-Brenner: And what was that story? What was happening in Grozny during the war?

De Waal: All I can say is that when I finally saw the city in 1995 it looked like pictures of Stalingrad. Just appalling levels of destruction. Whole streets and neighborhoods had been leveled. High-rise blocks in the center of the city, which had been full of ethnic Russians, completely destroyed.

Sometimes one got the impression that the Russians were trying to refight the Second World War, trying to take Berlin in 1945. The stain of this must lie on the conscience of Pavel Grachev, Yeltsin's defense minister, who, first of all, tried to storm the city with tanks, which was a crazy thing to do. The tanks got trapped in the streets and burned, and there was a horrific massacre by the Chechen fighters of these Russian soldiers. This story is told in the first chapter of the book by Carlotta [Gall], who went and interviewed the survivors from the Maikop tank regiment. Having suffered this defeat, Grachev basically turned to the air force and ordered them to bomb the city with planes and heavy artillery—which should be a war crime under any definition.

And, of course, this was the great turning point. The point at which a Chechnya that had been part of Russia—part of the Soviet Union—was basically destroyed, including its professional class, and forced back into the more archaic, antimodern, anti-Russian Chechnya that we see today. The city of Grozny may have been rebuilt, but the Chechnya we have today is the result of the bombings of 1994, 1995.

Udensiva-Brenner: You write in the beginning of your book that the conflict cannot be fully understood without understanding the background. What's the historical context?

De Waal: The history of Russia and Chechnya is mainly one of conflict, starting at the end of the eighteenth century. While the South Caucasus were basically incorporated into the Russian Empire by the beginning of the nineteenth century—there was fighting, there was violence, but by the 1820s they were basically part of the Russian Empire—the North Caucasus, even though they were closer on the Russian side of the mountains, had this very, very bloody conflict with Russia, which some people have called the longest war of the nineteenth century. It continued right up until the 1860s, and some of the fiercest resistance came from the Chechens. They were very well organized, they fought very hard, and they had a kind of collective leadership, which meant it was harder to buy them off or co-opt them. In the end, they were conquered and they did accommodate; they did start to speak Russian; they did become part of the Russian nation state. But they were always pretty much on the lowest rung of the ladder, as a Muslim people, as a militant people.

The history of Russia and Chechnya is mainly one of conflict, starting at the end of the eighteenth century.

Udensiva-Brenner: And then when the Communists came into the picture, the Chechens thought they would improve their lot and fought on their side against the Imperial army.

De Waal: The Bolsheviks were very good at speaking the language of national liberation. People like the Chechens definitely fought more with the Reds against the Whites in the Civil War, but of course once the Bolsheviks established the state, Chechens became problematic again. In 1944, they were deported en masse by Stalin, one of the so-called punished peoples.

Udensiva-Brenner: Tell me about the deportations.

De Waal: This is a very, very important story. And it applies to many Soviet peoples—Germans, Crimean Tatars, Koreans, and, various nationalities in the Caucasus, all of whom were deemed to be liable to treachery in the paranoid world of Stalin's Soviet Union. This was either because they were directly affiliated with foreign powers, like the Germans, or because they were Turkic, or, in the case of the Chechens, because they had a history of resistance. During the Second World War, when Russia was fighting the Germans, the NKVD—the secret police led by [secret police chief Lavrenty] Beria—also devoted huge amounts of resources to deporting these people, every last babe in arms. So you could just imagine the logistics. Thousands and thousands of railcars being deployed for deportations to Kazakhstan, all done by surprise overnight, in order to minimize resistance. Everyone was crowded into these railcars and sent to Kazakhstan. The death rates were

This is a classic case of Russian leadership, where the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing.

absolutely appalling, from typhus, from hunger; and then when the Chechens arrived in Kazakhstan, there were very few facilities to deal with them.

The deported became second-class citizens who couldn't travel; they were incredibly restricted in their rights and were really the bottom of the pile. This incidentally explains why during the Soviet period the Chechens had a reputation as black marketeers. One of the reasons that a large number of them joined the criminal underworld is because they were an underclass for whom career advancement and the normal ways of getting jobs were blocked.

There was a lot of trauma. I met a man, a Chechen commissar, who was witness to a massacre in Khaibakh, a village high in the mountains where the roads were so bad that, when the NKVD came up there to deport the residents, they decided to just massacre the old people, the sick people, because they couldn't get them down to the valley in time. They rounded up several hundred of the weakest people in a barn and set it on fire. And this man, Dziayudin Malsagov, a young Communist, witnessed this massacre and was absolutely horrified. He very doggedly tried to report on it, until he was himself deported. He thought it was all a mistake; he wrote letters, until he was given to understand that he should shut up or he would risk being arrested. Then Stalin fell and Khrushchev went to return everyone from deportation. Suddenly this story became rather useful to Khrushchev, and Khrushchev received Malsagov in the opera house in Almaty. As far as Khrushchev was concerned, this was a denunciation of several of the Stalinist figures who had been responsible for the deportations—who were still in office—and it was an additional reason to get them fired. Malsagov carried on protesting and he was arrested, spending time in a Soviet prison. When I met him in '94, he was old and frail, and he couldn't really talk. In 1996, Carlotta and I actually went up into the mountains to see the village, which was completely ruined and deserted and hadn't been lived in since the 1940s. And there's a brief coda to the story: A film was made about this massacre and met with a denial campaign saying that this was all made up, that this never happened.

Udensiva-Brenner: When?

De Waal: In the past few years, in Putin's Russia. The horrors of the deportations are still something that isn't really acknowledged in Russia as a whole. In fact, there's incredible insensitivity about it, including, amazingly, that the Putin administration and the Russian Olympic Committee decided to have the closing ceremony of the Sochi Olympics on the 70th anniversary of the Chechen deportations. An event in the North Caucasus, usually a tragic day for Chechens, and yet they couldn't even have that closing ceremony one day before or one day after; they chose to have it on that very anniversary, which shows the incredible kind of amnesia and indifference to this in Russia as a whole.

Udensiva-Brenner: And what effect did the deportations have on Chechen identity?

De Waal: A huge effect. For one thing, Chechnya before the deportations was quite dispersed, quite regional, with low rates of Russian usage. And, in a funny way, the deportations made it more Soviet, because the people were taken away from their homeland and forced into another part of the Soviet Union. But they also made it more Chechen; they made the people into a collective—it suddenly didn't matter which village you were from; you were branded a Chechen by the mere fact of the deportation. And the fact that they were allowed home was miraculous, but the subject was never talked about in public, in schools; it was a kind of family secret that you were supposed to bottle up. And that all burst to the surface during the Gorbachev period when the Chechens wanted justice, recognition for what had happened. So this was definitely a driving force for the independence movement in the Soviet period.

Udensiva-Brenner: And then the movement really took off with Jokhar Dudayev, who was a somewhat unlikely figure to lead Chechen independence. Tell me about him.

De Waal: Dudayev was a man of many amazing contradictions. A man who was born in a Chechen mountain village, but was deported to Kazakhstan in 1944, basically as a baby. He grew up completely outside of Chechnya, first in exile in

Kazakhstan, and then in Estonia, after he joined the Soviet air force. He had to lie on his application form and pretend to be an Ossetian, because Chechnya was very much considered a subgrade nation at that point. He rose to become the Chechens' first air force general in Estonia. He married a Russian poet, the daughter of a Soviet officer. So he was a Soviet patriot, a Chechen romantic, a slightly crazy guy who spoke incredibly passionately about everything and would make these wild threats.

An extraordinary personality whom I met during my second visit to Chechnya. That said, he was someone who bears great responsibility for the start of that conflict because of his military, romantic demeanor. He was someone who was not good at making deals and compromises.

Udensiva-Brenner: What did Dudayev's Chechnya look like?

De Waal: The republic was a kind of a black hole within the Russian state—it was criminalized; there was a lot of black marketeering. But I would argue it was only in the most extreme example of the whole of Russia during that time. If you went to Vladivostok, if you went to a lot of places in Russia, they were also criminalized. There was also a huge black market; Chechnya was just the most extreme example. But, of course, because of the self-declared independence, because of the ethnic nature of the Chechens, and because they had constituted a strong mafia in Soviet times, they were identified as the "other," and so Chechnya became a problem Yeltsin wanted to resolve.

Udensiva-Brenner: Did Yeltsin take any steps to resolve it before deciding to invade?

De Waal: There were some negotiations. But, in my view, they weren't serious. I think Dudayev was always craving a one-on-one meeting with Yeltsin, and some people thought he should have it—but Yeltsin denied him that meeting, even though, by the end of '94, Chechen independence was more of a symbolic project. They were still using the ruble, there were flights to and from Moscow, the borders were open. Had Yeltsin shown Dudayev a little bit of respect and used a bit of political capital to have a meeting with him, I think Dudayev would have been more inclined to compromise, as strange and ridiculous as that sounds.

Udensiva-Brenner: There was a point in '96 when Yeltsin had finally agreed to meet with Dudayev, but Dudayev was assassinated before the meeting could take place. What happened?

De Waal: This is a classic case of Russian leadership, where the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. They were simultaneously planning a meeting between Dudayev and Yeltsin, and they were also planning to kill him, and I don't believe one effort was more sincere than the other. I think they were doing both tracks at the same time, and the meeting never happened because Dudayev was on his satellite phone and a guided missile tracked the signal and killed him. It was, in a way, an obvious blow to the Chechen cause; but in another way, it basically gave the leadership to [Aslan] Maskhadov, who was a much more moderate leader and with whom it was easier for the Russians to make peace.

I should tell you a good personal story, that makes it into the book,

Top to bottom: Postcard depicting the Memorial of the Martyrs of the Deportation of 1944, in Grozny, and the ruins of Grozny after the war of 1994–1996; Zherebtsova (Chechen Diary, 1995).

about that agreement. This, I think, was the most extraordinary story I did during my reporting in Chechnya. It was spring, probably May of 1996, and I went down to Chechnya with two French reporter friends and a Norwegian, Åsne Seierstad, who's now quite a famous author. The four of us drove into eastern Chechnya looking for Maskhadov. Dudayev had been killed about a month before, and Maskahdov was someone we respected. He was the rebel commander but a very thoughtful, quiet person—not a radical. He was someone you could talk to and the Russians could potentially talk to.

We went to his home village and spoke to some people we knew, and they took us outside the village in a jeep and walked us into the middle of this ancient beech forest. They told us to wait and left us there. A little while later they came back with Maskhadov, who was in his camouflage fatigues. He just sat down on a tree stump and gave us the interview right there in the forest. In fact, on the tape, which you have now at the Harriman, there should be some birdsong in the background.

Maskhadov was in a very good mood because basically he'd just gotten word that the negotiations with the OSCE had borne fruit and he was going to go to Moscow to meet Yeltsin and hopefully sign a peace deal in the Kremlin. This was incredible news, and we were the first people to hear of it. We had a massive exclusive. The trouble was, journalistically speaking, that we were in the middle of eastern Chechnya in the days before mobile phones, and by the time we got back to Grozny and filed our story, word had already gotten out. If we'd been able to file a couple of hours before, we would have gotten our exclusive. We still had the story pretty much better than anyone else, but we didn't quite have the scoop. Anyway, it was still an amazing story, and we got Maskhadov's version of it and this extraordinary interview with him.

Udensiva-Brenner: That's incredible. In the end, Maskhadov worked out a peace deal with Yeltsin's national security adviser, Alexander Lebed, in August '96. What happened there?

De Waal: Speaking of left hand and right hand, there was an attempt by Russia to militarily win the conflict [in August 1996]. And this went disastrously wrong, and the Chechen rebels recaptured Grozny basically as Yeltsin was being inaugurated. A huge humiliation for the Kremlin. Shamil Basayev led the operation into Grozny, took the Russians by surprise, and reclaimed the center of the city. At which point the option was either to have another battle to retake the city or to sign a peace agreement. And Lebed, the tough-talking general who ended the Transdniestria conflict in 1992, flew down to the region and met with the Chechens and signed a peace deal stipulating that there would be elections in Chechnya, the issue of status was going to be postponed for five years, and the Russians would withdraw. Some of these things happened, but other things didn't. The Russians did withdraw their troops from Chechnya; there were indeed elections, which the OSCE monitored; and Maskhadov was recognized as the elected president of Chechnya. But the status was not defined—as far the Chechens were concerned, he was the president of independent Chechnya, and as far as the Russians were concerned, he was the president of a Chechnya that was part of Russia. Lebed did the deal, but unfortunately Chechnya was so devastated that the whole place had collapsed into lawlessness and the Russians did absolutely nothing to financially support it. In this vacuum, Chechnya became the most frightening and horrible place to be, and Maskhadov basically didn't have the authority to run the place.

Udensiva-Brenner: And that's what eventually led to the second war.

De Waal: Yes, with many, many twists and turns. Chechnya during Independence Part Two was really a frightening place, a black hole. And who bears responsibility there? Well, the Chechens, for sure, because maybe they should have tried to get a better deal with Moscow. But, certainly, Moscow because they basically watched as the whole place collapsed and did nothing to support the reconstruction of Grozny. They created the conditions for the second military intervention under Putin in 1999.

Udensiva-Brenner: While writing the book, did you ever imagine that, after the temporary peace agreement that Russia and Chechnya had signed, Russia would invade again, knowing how misguided the war had been and how difficult it had been to achieve some sort of peace?

De Waal: I must admit I didn't anticipate it back in '96 and '97 when we were finishing the book. This was a hugely traumatic conflict, and I figured it would take Russia, as a whole, and Chechnya, in particular,

War, a drawing by ten-year-old Polina Zherebtsova from Chechen Diary (1995).

a long time to get over it. I guess I didn't anticipate how bad things would get in Chechnya. The complete internal collapse. In particular, the kidnappings that happened there. And, during the Yeltsin era, I had not anticipated the rise of Putin, who came to power using that conflict.

Udensiva-Brenner: Your book, and now these tapes, is an incredible resource. What is your hope for the tapes?

De Waal: I've passed from being the guy who was out there on the front lines seeing the bombs fall and getting my boots muddy—although I do still sometimes get my boots muddy—to being the guy who sits at the computer in my comfortable Western capsule and analyzes. But somewhere in me is that person who got out there and got all that empirical experience and believes that you can't really understand places as complex as the Caucasus unless you've been out there and talked to people on the ground and heard what they have to say.

When you interview someone and use it for a book, you're probably using at best 5 percent or just choosing some nice quotations. Probably a good half of the people interviewed are now dead. A lot of the Chechens died in the conflict, and some of the Russians have died of old age. I interviewed many Chechens, obviously—people like Aslan Maskhadov, the military leader who became the Chechen president; there was a chief negotiator called Usman Imaev who worked in the first Dudayev government who gave me an incredible interview both about the preindependence period and the negotiations. On the Russian side, people like Yegor Gaidar, Galina Starovoitova, Sergei Yushenkov, Arkady Volsky—all of those people have died; some of them were assassinated, unfortunately. They all had important stories to tell. So I think it's an important resource.

Some people are a bit sniffy about the technique of writing a book relying on oral testimony, and they would say that the only record is the written record, but I don't believe that is the case. Archival record is also based on the subjective view of the person writing whatever document it is at the time. And the oral testimony of someone who is telling you what they saw—they're obviously putting a personal spin on it, and in a lot of cases, trying to put themselves in a good light. But I think a sensitive reader/listener can form his or her own judgment about the authenticity of what people are saying, and I think most of it has to be taken very seriously. The stories that people tell, particularly if they are corroborated by a few sources, are very valuable firsthand testimony of what happened. And, of course, in a war, a lot of it is never written down; a lot of it is who is in the room, who is out there, what was happening.

I want to say how grateful I am that these interviews are being preserved. I think they not only convey information but they also convey a kind of mood and aura from that era, which was very turbulent. I hope they are used wisely. ■