CHAPTER 1

Introduction: On Transcultural Memory and Reception

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In the autumn of 2012, the sculpture *The Black Cone* by the Spanish artist Santiago di Sierra was placed in front of the Parliament of Iceland, on Reykjavik’s symbolic square Austurvöllur. *The Black Cone* was intended to commemorate the massive public protests, the so-called ‘pots and pans revolution’ in Iceland 2008–2009 against the politicians held responsible for the country’s financial crash. While the majority of Reykjavik’s city council in 2012 agreed to accept the artist’s donation of the monument, council members were divided on the issue and it did raise controversies.¹ Yet, since 2012 the monument has largely vanished from public attention.² Perhaps its shape – a natural rock with a ridge created by a small black cone – allows it to remain unnoticed or casually overlooked as one of several organic parts of the square. How are we to understand this lack of explicit reactions to di Sierra’s monument? Is it rejection, purposeful ignoring, or simply indifference? At the very least we can say that as by 2016, no one has taken ownership or re-appropriated the monument as a memorial representation for her or his own purposes.³

When in 2012 Christopher Clark published the book *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* as yet another attempt to analyze the causes of the outbreak of the First World War, reactions were numerous. Published strategically at the advent of the war’s centenary by a renowned Cambridge historian, *The Sleepwalkers* was reviewed in newspapers and history journals across Europe, sometimes with acclaim and sometimes with lukewarm appreciation.⁴ Clark’s account was also included in several scholarly review articles that

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3 Ibid.
traced the arguments proposed in the wave of new history books appearing in connection with the centenary of the First World War. Moreover, Clark made an effort to create attention around his book and held lectures in numerous German cities during the summer of 2014. Yet, for academic literature more unusually, Clark’s book was also explicitly mentioned in a speech by Serbia’s president Tomislav Nikolić two years after its publication, in the summer of 2014. Clark, according to Nikolić, was the primary source of a revisionism that aimed to convince the world that it was Serbs who had caused the Great War. Thus, argued Nikolić, ‘the Serb struggle for freedom … is now to be dragged through the mud’. Though Clark himself had, already in 2013, clearly stated that he had ‘of course not wished to blame Serbia for the outbreak of the war’, this was clearly how he was interpreted by Nikolić and a number of historians and commentators in Serbia.

Thus, unlike The Black Cone, which seems to have become a silent and unengaging medium of commemoration in spite of the importance of the events it recalls, Clark’s book caused very explicit reactions, both in the historical debates of several European countries and in the political sphere and commemorative activities of Serbia in 2014. As these two examples show, the effects and afterlives of memorializations and reinterpretations of the past can vary to a great extent. Trying to understand how and why individuals and communities react towards mediations of memory is a complex challenge. In an article published in 2002, Wulf Kansteiner points out that memory studies have ‘not yet paid enough attention to the problem of reception both in

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