

Mercer uses Chapter 4 to test his theory of the “desires hypothesis,” in which the desirability of behavior determines the type of explanation that state leaders will make about the actions of others. Investigating the Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis through the lenses of both rational deterrence theory and through social psychology, Mercer illuminates the differences in predicted outcomes from the competing theories. His conclusion: the events in Europe from 1904-1918 illustrate that dispositional (character-based) attributions are usually given for undesirable behavior, while situational (based on the environment) attributions are used to explain undesirable behavior. Further, due to the fact that the Bosnian crisis followed the Moroccan crisis, the events allow for an investigation of interdependence, i.e. how previous events influence judgments of current behavior.

Mercer begins by providing a background to the Bosnian crisis. Austria had long desired to formally annex Bosnia and Herzegovina, referring to Serbia as a “bone in the throat” which was a continuous threat to their territorial integrity. “Annexing Bosnia and supporting the independence of Bulgaria was a limited gambit to ensure Austrian security” (p. 113). Austria went through with their plan to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 in a *fait accompli*, leaving the Russians with nothing despite earlier promises to assist Russian aspirations in the straits. Russia, backed by France and Britain, challenged Austria, but Germany supported their actions. In 1909, after six months of negotiations, Germany “delivered a note to the Russians – some call it an ultimatum – demanding that the Russian accept the Austrian proposal or risk war.” The Russian foreign minister Alexander Izvolsky yielded, thus humiliating the Russians, while the Austrians and Germans were triumphant.

Mercer then traces out the various reactions to the crisis capitulation, showing how Britain, France, and Germany reacted to the announcement and how they viewed each other since their previous encounter in Morocco. He then traces out the various explanations provided by each country of Russia’s actions in surrendering to Austria’s takeover without a fight. I will highlight a few of his findings, as the chapter contains a large number of similar conclusions.

British explanations of Russian behavior, that is, being duped, were dispositional; they thought Izvolsky, the foreign minister, a liar, a fool, or of weak character, but “no one offered a situational explanation for the undesirable behavior” (p. 119). Similarly, the German take on the earlier Austrian actions “did not lead them to put more faith in their Austrian ally” in this scenario, thus contradicting the expectations of the deterrence argument and supporting Mercer’s argument: allies rarely get reputations for having resolve. Further, despite Germany’s retreat at the earlier encounter at Algeciras, “the British and French saw Berlin’s menacing influence everywhere” (p. 126). Even though the Germans yielded at Algeciras, and “the deterrence argument expects everyone to view the Germans as irresolute and likely to yield again” (p. 127), this was not the case. Mercer concludes with another application of the concept of interdependence, where past events condition current views of other states. Because British leaders viewed German behavior as undesirable, they created dispositional explanations, labeling the Germans as “aggressive” even after they backed down in Algeciras. This is in contradiction with the predictions of deterrence theory and supportive of Mercer’s overall hypotheses.