

History 6790-301 Walls and Frontiers: Ancient to Modern  
Simcha Gross  
Anne Berg

## Course Description

*Walls and Frontiers: Ancient to Modern* invites students to consider the role of boundaries and boundary-making in shaping both history and historical inquiry. Together, we will examine man-made fortifications from brick-and-mortar structures, wires and fences, to CCTV surveillance, as well as natural boundaries such as deserts, oceans, rivers and mountain ranges, and the relationships between them. We will likewise grapple with the conceptual divisions that order the world, from map-making to notions of alterity. Our focus will extend to liminal spaces, such as borderlands, frontiers, middle grounds, no-mans-lands, and shatter zones to understand the processes of boundary-making and remaking in places where state-power reaches its limits, and the scholarly categories used to make sense of them.

Thinking with concepts such as security, property, law and identity, we interrogate how polities – ancient through modern – deployed technologies of rule, and forged and reimagined notions of strangeness, kinship, and familiarity in the face of trade and cultural exchange, migration – variously compelled and voluntary – war and empire building, natural disaster and disease. We recognize that conflict is at the very center of human understanding of order, which becomes concrete in walls and their conceptual relatives.

The geographical and chronological reach of our weekly readings ask students to step outside their comfort zone and engage with concepts, places, and practices that may be entirely unfamiliar to them. At the same time students will apply the concepts we engage to their own area of expertise and develop a final paper on a frontier of their own choosing, in ways that allows them to unthink and rethink the normative understanding of boundaries in their particular context.

Students are expected to read a book and several articles each week, come to class prepared and ready to participate in an electronics-free environment. In addition to producing a work of original scholarship in their final paper, students will first assemble an annotated bibliography in preparation and write two book reviews related to class discussions. The brunt of our work will be collective and collaborative, building on each other's expertise and exploring new territory together. The course will culminate in a symposium that invites students to present their original research in conversation with a diverse array of scholars whose work we studied together throughout the semester.