few years ago, I coined the phrase “border anxiety” to capture a phenomenon that seems to have gripped the West even more powerfully since. The peoples of Europe, North America, Australia, and other former imperial outposts live in fear of being overwhelmed by waves of migration that their governments seem powerless to control. It matters little whether the threat exists in reality or is mainly a figment of the imagination. Borders have been essential to civilization since its inception. Border anxiety is an instinctive human response to the re-emergence in a modern guise of ancient tensions between nomadic and sedentary peoples. Nation states are the only mechanism yet devised that can reliably banish the fear of war and anarchy—and nation states by definition require borders. A world without borders would be a utopian dream, but as nightmarish in reality as the Hobbesian state of nature, in which “the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

In his new book, *The Great Great Wall: Along the Borders of History from China to Mexico*, Ian Volner never admits to having felt the deep-seated emotions that prompt border anxiety. Contemplating the walls of Jericho, the oldest city for which we have both archaeological and literary evidence, he
suggests that this structure “may not have appeared for any particular reason; instead, it created its own rationale—the idea itself of difference—that there could be not only an ‘us,’ but a ‘them.’” Volner is a writer on architecture for reputable organs such as The Wall Street Journal, but like many intellectuals he is resolutely opposed to any non-ideological explanation for a phenomenon such as wall-building. “Archaeology,” he opines, “throws us back into the realm of ideology, and thence to myth . . . .” Offering no evidence, other than a vague analogy with the invention of fire, he goes on to dismiss the possibility that the inhabitants of this “tell,” or artificial hill, living nearly ten thousand years ago, might simply have built a wall to protect themselves. “Using the built environment as an instrument of separation was never the work of intellectual innocents seeking a purely practical means to a purely practical end. It was always and already a matter of ideology, an ideology born the instant the people of Jericho began stacking their undressed stones.” To which many readers, including this one, may respond: “How does he know?” Surely it is not the act of building protective walls that is the stuff of myth, but the notion that there has ever been a human community with any claim to be called “civilized” that could do without boundaries, borders, frontiers, and, yes, walls. Only in the Garden of Eden, the Elysian Fields, the Land of Cockaigne, or other idyllic places that transcend what we normally understand by history have people dispensed with the need to defend themselves. Volner himself comes up against this irreducible fact of life when he visits the site of Jericho and finds that the Palestinian children who seem so charming suddenly morph, from one minute to the next, into rock-throwing little monsters.

As a writer on architecture, Volner cannot ignore the fact that some of the most impressive human artifacts in history have been walls. An acknowledgment of the sheer grandeur of such structures is implicit in his title, which alludes both to the Great Wall of China and, with heavy-handed irony, to Donald Trump’s proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexican border. He doesn’t question the rationale of the Chinese emperors who sought to exclude barbarians from their Middle Kingdom, even though there is far more continuity in attitudes between the Ming dynasty and the Communist Party leadership, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, than between President William McKinley (whose Boundary Commission first established the border with Mexico) and the present occupant of the White House. The rulers of China are as brutal in their disregard for human rights as they ever were, as the incarceration and “re-education” of at least a million Uighur Muslims in the western province of Xinjiang demonstrates. During the century that separates McKinley and Trump, by contrast, the United States has become the world’s most powerful defender of democracy and the rule of law. Even if the holding facilities on its southern border have been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of migrants, there is no comparison between the humanitarian records of China and America.

Volner obviously knows this, yet somehow he never acknowledges that Trump’s concern and that of his supporters in regaining control over the border is as much to safeguard the hard-won civil rights of American citizens, many of them first- or second-generation immigrants, as it is to exclude illegal migrants. Rights that are not enforced are worthless. And the presence of tens of millions of illegal immigrants damages the status of those who are legal. Obama understood this,
which is why he expelled more illegals than any other president, before or since. Trump has taken the logical next step, which is to stop them entering in the first place. He has also tried to deter those who sacrifice everything, even their own and their children’s lives, to enter the United States. Amazingly, the President of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, took responsibility for this problem, commenting on the scandal of a father and daughter who drowned in the Rio Grande. “People don’t flee their homes because they want to. They flee their homes because they feel they have to. They fled El Salvador, they fled our country,” he admitted. “It’s our fault.”

This anguished acknowledgment of guilt did not prevent plenty of people in the United States and Europe from blaming Donald Trump. Such is the disgust that this president evokes in some circles that, even though the wall associated with his name has yet to be built, in their eyes he is guilty of a crime against humanity. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democrats’ latter-day La Pasionaria, has accused Trump of creating “concentration camps” on the Mexican border. Nobody can remain neutral in such an atmosphere of mutual recrimination, least of all the author of The Great Great Wall.

Ian Volner, who lives in Harlem, New York, cannot even bear to mention “a certain name.” He implicitly compares Trump to the arsonist who burned down the Temple of Ephesus in order to be remembered. It is quite a feat to expunge the President’s name from a book largely devoted to the political and practical obstacles that have stymied repeated attempts by the administration to get the wall financed and built—so far. A story with no heroes and an absentee villain is not much of a story. But that wasn’t the author’s intention. “What I am aiming at here is a phantasmagoria,” he tells us, “that might get us closer to the sensation of walls in the mind and on the body.” So this account of how the wall that has yet to be built compares to other walls that were has inevitably been pumped up with a good deal of that hot Mexican desert air.

That does not mean it is worthless. There is a decent chapter on Hadrian’s Wall, a true wonder of the ancient world, built to protect what was not yet England from people who were not yet Scots. Volner enjoys his adventures on the bleak Northumberland landscape, but questions the point of a structure that was only used for its original purpose for three centuries. That is a longer timespan than the history of the United States. If Trump’s wall is ever built, its progenitor would probably be quite content to know that it would still be standing in a hundred years, never mind the almost two millennia for which Hadrian’s Wall has endured.

Volner devotes another, more original, essay on the last of many walls of Paris, or l’enceinte de Thiers, built in the 1840s by King Louis Philippe’s prime minister, Adolph Thiers. This “old umbrella,” as he called himself, was one of the nineteenth century’s great survivors: a voluminous historian arrested and exiled by Napoleon III, he re-emerged as prime minister after the emperor had been defeated and captured in the Franco-Prussian War. Besieged by Moltke’s Prussian army, Paris held out behind its walls and was briefly ruled by the Commune, praised by Marx as a prototype of his utopia. Thiers made peace with Bismarck, then laid siege to the city again. He breached his own fortifications, hunted down the communards and had thousands of them, trapped by the old umbrella’s system of walls, bastions, and gates, summarily shot. Thus the fate
Volner devotes a whole chapter to the Berlin Wall, which ought to be a rewarding subject—if only because, unlike all the other walls he considers, it wasn’t built to keep people out, but to prevent them leaving, if necessary by shooting them. Yet this surreal looking-glass aspect of the “Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier,” and indeed most of what it represented between its erection on August 13, 1961 and its opening on November 9, 1989, eludes this author. He gives us the known facts about its history, but no sense of the known unknowns, let alone the unknown unknowns, of this bizarre division of a capital city into two discrete and mutually excluding worlds.

He starts with a flourish: “The Berlin Wall was born at a garden party and died at a press conference.” As it happens, I was present at that press conference and can even hazard a guess at the moment of death. The conference was not, as he claims, “routine”: most unusually, it was broadcast live on state television. Volner, who does not appear to have watched the footage (easily found online) of the events of November 9, claims that the announcement that the Wall was opening happened “after the conference had formally ended.” That is not true. Volner appears to have based his account on a single article. He should at least have read *The Collapse*, the definitive account of what took place that night, by the Harvard historian Mary Elise Sarotte.

Here is what actually happened. The East German spokesman, Günter Schabowski, read out a brief but opaque statement, in response to a question just before the end of the press conference, announcing that a new travel law would be introduced allowing East Germans to emigrate. A flurry of questions followed. In reply to one of these, shouted by a journalist (there are competing claims as to his identity): “When do they [the new rules] come into effect?” Schabowski replied: “Immediately.” It was the fatal blunder, but he did not yet realize what he had done—and the journalists weren’t sure either. More questions followed, from which it emerged that the new law also applied to Berlin, which had a different legal status from the rest of Germany. But the Wall had not yet been mentioned.

Then I stood up, holding a microphone. I asked: “What will happen now to the Berlin Wall?” The room fell silent—a silence long enough for the full significance of what was happening to sink in. If people are allowed to cross the border, why have a wall through the capital city? Schabowski, perhaps with an inkling of what he had done, realized that the game was up. He repeated the question, announced that this would be the last one, struggled to answer it, then brought proceedings to a close. Thousands of East Berliners, having seen Schabowski’s discomfiture on live television, drew their own conclusions. They came onto the streets and demanded to be let through. The border guards put up little resistance. Why should they? The Wall they were supposed to protect was already history, killed by questions to which their masters had no answer. The time of death, when not only the Berlin Wall, but the Cold War itself expired, was that moment of truth.
Daniel Johnson is the Editor of *Standpoint*.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 3, on page 78

Copyright © 2020 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/11/up-against-the-wall