



NOT QUITE AN OUTSIDER
JOHN KAMPFNER

John Kampfner has had a 40-year career in public life spanning global affairs, politics, media, and arts. His latest book, his eighth, *Braver New World*, is published in April 2026. His previous recent book, *In Search of Berlin*, was published in 2023. His 2020 book, *Why the Germans Do It Better*, was a Sunday Times bestseller, as was his 2003 book, *Blair's Wars*. He writes regular columns for *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico*, the *FT*, and *Der Spiegel*. He is a regular contributor on broadcast media. He is a regular speaker at conferences and literary festivals. His current positions include: Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, Deputy Chair of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft (German-British Society), Chair of Young Königswinter Conference, and Chair of the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration. – Address: 18 Mecklenburgh Square, London, WC1N 2AD, United Kingdom. E-mail: john@jkampfner.net.

I think I was a little strange, in more ways than one.

Not only am I not a registered scholar, in the sense of being attached to a particular university, but as a long-standing Berliner I did not live in the beautiful but rarefied confines of Grunewald. Did that make my experience or enjoyment of my year at Wiko any less intense? Not at all, I would argue. But it did make it slightly different.

During my ten months, aided by a beautiful office in the New Building and by superb library facilities, I worked feverishly hard on three projects. The first was my book; alongside that were regular commissions for newspapers (such as *The Guardian* and *Foreign Policy*), radio, and TV on the state of German politics and society, which were

particularly intense during the period of the general election campaign; and then from early 2025 I was presented with a surprising commission by the BBC.

Alongside these, the regular Wiko events required time and commitment. I made sure that, unless I was travelling, I attended all the Colloquia—which were generally of a high standard—alongside the dinners and lunches. Where I feel I could not devote enough time were workshops and other meetings planned less in advance, and the informal social gatherings. But you cannot have everything in life, or in an academic year. And I do not feel it detracted from the relationships that I developed.

There were many reasons to feel delighted when I was informed of my fellowship. Wiko's reputation is unsurpassed. For me, it answered a desire to fall in the middle of an intellectual triangle—between journalism, public policy, and academe. They each bring something specific.

My 40 years in journalism—as a foreign correspondent, magazine editor, documentary maker, radio presenter, and commentator—have provided adrenaline, immediacy, excitement, and a sense of being in the front row of important global events. Yet journalism is always the first draft of history; often, as soon as you have devoted yourself to a subject, you are required to move on.

My work for various think tanks has provided another important attribute—a direct line to policymakers in government and a sense, even if from a distance, of inputting into important decisions.

Yet the missing link for me has always been scholarship. As a member of the governing Council of King's College London, in the mid-2010s I gained useful insight into the workings of academic institutions—everything from finance to personnel, from student housing to fundraising (mercifully, not something that German institutions have to worry too much about so far). Most of all, I had the opportunity to talk to academics at all levels not just about the organisational side of their work, but also about its content. It made me yearn for the opportunity to have time and space to think—and to delve more deeply.

Wiko has given me all of this. On the subject areas that I am more familiar with—not least in two areas where several Fellows had specialisations, memory culture and the Middle East—I have had spent several discursive, sometimes impassioned, hours deep in debate and thought. But also, I have treasured the Colloquia and subsequent lunch conversations about other areas, not least scientific ones, where I had the opportunity quietly to learn.

And then there were the more direct contributions. For my BBC radio programme, a one-hour archival enquiry into the legacy of *Mein Kampf*, I received several helpful

suggestions for contributors. I ended up interviewing one Fellow and one Fellow's partner. I am grateful to Daniel Schönplugg for helping turn my still-flawed written German into something presentable for an accompanying piece for *Der Spiegel*.

Whenever I was faced with a newspaper commentary about German politics or other related subjects, I made sure I turned to various Fellows or staff for their thoughts.

As for my book on global best practice, I used my Colloquium in April to subject myself to peer review from my peers. And I'm very pleased that I did, as the results have helped me hone my arguments. That book, the eighth of my career, now with the title *Braver New World*, will be published first in English in late spring/early summer 2026.

Lucy, although away for much of the time because of her work, also gained a considerable amount from her interactions, particularly those relating to Wiko's research on Ukraine. Viktoriya Sereda's suggestions about possible stories and contacts were much appreciated. She also enjoyed presenting the arguments in her book, *The Baton and the Cross*, during an online seminar with Wiko-affiliated researchers in Ukraine about the way senior clerics in the Russian Orthodox Church have colluded with Vladimir Putin and given a spiritual imprimatur to his invasion.

Lucy is also extremely grateful to Anja and Stefan for digging out some books and articles for her on Russian clerics and Soviet-era composers, to Petria and Vera for making her feel at home, to Frank for his advice on using a Zoom recorder and to everyone in the tech department. Last but by no means least, Eva's German lessons were a huge boon during this year—even if Lucy didn't always do enough homework.

We both hope to engage Wiko more in that in the future and to keep in contact with many of the Fellows, wherever they may be.

We leave Wiko, but we do not leave Berlin. I chose to live in the city some time ago largely because of the intensity of the debate, the sense of urgency that it brings. This was particularly pronounced over the past academic year.

We leave with much gratitude and thanks towards the staff—not only those that were prominent in our lives, but also those behind the scenes. Long may Wiko thrive.