



## Kiel Through the Decades

### 1945-1960: Early Years and Specialization

Franz Kiel GmbH was founded in Nördlingen in 1945 as a small metalworking company specializing in the design of iron parts. Just three years later, the company built a production facility manufacturing metal parts and furniture as well as vehicle equipment. Customers included Mercedes-Benz, Maschinenfabrik Augsburg Nürnberg (MAN), and Magirus Deutz. Increasingly, the production of metal parts for truck and bus seat construction emerged as the main line of business. By the 1950s, Franz Kiel GmbH already employed 120 people, primarily producing rigid, non-adjustable passenger seats. With the introduction of the Greyhound seat for buses in 1956, things literally got moving: it was the first seat with an adjustable backrest and could also be extended sideways.

### 1960-1980: Growth Through Product Range Expansion and Major Contracts

From the early 1960s onward, Kiel focused on bus manufacturers as its main customers. To enhance comfort, coach seats were equipped with components such as armrests and footrests. The first large orders fueled company growth, increasing the workforce to 200 employees. The in-house workshops were also expanded accordingly: in 1965, powder-coating and wet-painting facilities were added. In the mid-1970s, Kiel received its first major orders from Deutsche Bundesbahn, which further boosted the company's growth trajectory.

### 1980-1990: Breakthrough with Innovative Products

Kiel achieved a major breakthrough in the passenger seating business in 1980 with the development of seats designed to avoid noise generation and with durable, long-lasting adjustment mechanisms. In 1981, Kiel developed the robust *Kiel 1*, the first one-piece, self-supporting plastic shell seat for city buses produced by injection molding. Its successor, the *Kiel Linie*, offered greater comfort with seat and backrest cushions. Introduced in 1985, this version was also used in trams.

As the production of individual seat components became increasingly complex, the company began, from 1983 onward, to focus more on the development and production of complete seats and seating systems. Extensive investments were made in a high-bay warehouse as well as in painting and powder-coating facilities. At the end of the 1980s, Kiel introduced welding robots and CNC-controlled systems, further increasing the company's efficiency. Initially specializing mainly in bus seating, Kiel began positioning itself in the late 1980s as a serious competitor in the rail passenger seating sector – first for regional and light rail, with long-distance trains added later. In 1989, the company reaffirmed its commitment to its birthplace, Nördlingen, by constructing a new administration building, a new warehouse, and a new stamping facility.

### 1990-2011: The Path to Becoming a Global Player

By the early 1990s, the company had grown to a size that enabled it to enter the world market. Increasing consolidation on both the supply and demand sides also contributed to the development of an international corporate group. Kiel had already set the course early on by pursuing a consistent international expansion strategy.

The company first entered into cooperations, for example in Spain and Italy, where Kiel products are still manufactured exclusively today. In 1996, a first subsidiary was founded in Turkey, followed a year later by Kiel Polska. In the Netherlands, Kiel acquired Deco Seating in 2000 and rebranded it as Kiel B.V.; in 2001, Kiel France s.a.r.l. was added. With the establishment of Kiel N.A. LLC in 2009, Kiel took an important strategic step to enter the key North American market. For Russia, the company founded the joint venture KFK OOO in

2011 with a regional rail components manufacturer, enabling it to enter this market as well. However, political developments made it necessary to exit this market again, at least temporarily, in 2021.

In addition, various further cooperations and license agreements with local seat manufacturers were established in several countries. Alongside international expansion, Kiel introduced a strict quality management system in the 1990s to further optimize products and production processes. In 1993, an in-house upholstery shop and a new surface technology division were established. In 1997, Kiel made major investments in product development and engineering to strengthen its leading position in the development of innovative seats that meet the highest standards worldwide. By the end of this decade of important developments, Kiel had increasingly evolved from a component to a system supplier. The development, production, delivery, and installation of complete seating systems for buses, trams, and trains became increasingly extensive.

### **2011-2021: Further Internationalization and Positioning as a Premium Manufacturer**

During this period, Kiel continued its internationalization and introduced innovative products to the market – for example, the Comfortline in 2014, a special seat for high-speed trains. In 2016/17, Emar Kiel in Spain and the subsidiary in North Macedonia were added; in 2019, global presence was expanded with a joint venture in China. In 2020, Kiel strengthened its position in North America through the acquisition of Kustom Seating in Chicago.

The year 2022 brought fresh momentum with a new corporate identity under the claim “Inspired by the Next Generation” and the Smart Seating 2035+ project in cooperation with Reutlingen University. In 2023, Kiel presented clear responses to the trends of ergonomics, lightweight design, and digitalization at the BUSWORLD Europe trade fair in Brussels with the new Avance X VIP “TECseat” and the Ligerio NG – ultra-light, modular, and digitally connected.

### **2022-2025: Realignment and Professionalization**

The past three years have been characterized by Kiel’s realignment and further professionalization. After the challenging pandemic and crisis years, the initial focus was on stabilizing and consolidating the sites. At the same time, the company prepared the next major step in international expansion: the opening of a new production center in North Macedonia in 2024. With this site, Kiel strategically expands its global production network and creates the foundation for even more flexible supply and cost structures.

Overall, the company has increasingly networked international production in recent years, aligning it to ensure customer orders can be processed even more efficiently. Synergies between the sites in Poland, Turkey, and North Macedonia are being systematically leveraged.

Another important milestone was the introduction of internationally oriented structures and control mechanisms for modern, transparent, and future-proof corporate management. With this, Kiel is ideally positioned to meet the growing demands of global markets in the years to come.

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