

The Kessler Era. Considerations on the sidelines of a research study

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2024 will mark the 100th anniversary of Bruno Kessler's birth. A research project aims to delve into his political story.

For the past couple of years, an imposing copper tile work, produced in the late 1970s by [Riccardo Schweizer](#), has stood out in the Aula Grande Hall of Fondazione Bruno Kessler's Via S. Croce headquarters. In the work created by the well-known artist from Trentino, Kessler is depicted next to some symbolic elements of his homeland, such as the battlements of the Buonconsiglio Castle, Dolomite landscapes, and an Alpine troops choir. It is an effective exercise in stylization, with Kessler depicted alongside the other "father" of contemporary Trentino, **Alcide De Gasperi**. In a private letter, Schweizer evocatively described Kessler's connection to his land and the decisive role he had played in the development of the Trentino valleys: "You are [...] part of Trentino like a house, a tree, etc."

The idea that **Kessler** be part of the natural and symbolic landscape of Trentino, just like a tree, a castle or a piece of dolomite, plastically describes the meaning of the life of the politician from Val di Sole, that was spent to contribute to the development of his community. Kessler has been many things: **leader of the DC** (Christian Democracy) group in the **Regional Council** (1956-1964), **councillor for finance and vice-president of the Province of Trento** (1956-1960), **president of the Province of Trento** (1960-1974), **member of the Commissione dei 12 for the implementation of the Statute** (1972-1991), **president of the Trentino-South Tyrol Region** (1974-1976), **member of the Chamber of Deputies** (1976-1983), **member of the Senate** (1983- 1991), **undersecretary of the Interior in the first Cossiga government**, **president of the Provincial Agrarian Institute of S. Michele all'Adige** (1957-1978), **president of the University of Trento** (1972-1984), **president of the Istituto Trentino di Cultura – now Fondazione Bruno Kessler –** (1962-1991). Many of the reforms that between the 1960s and 1970s redefined the face of Trentino – ranging from the Provincial Urban Plan to the founding of the University, the establishment of the Comprensori, the reform of the school system – saw him personally involved and are directly traceable to his political program, geared to a profound modernization of the economic, social, cultural and institutional fabric of Trentino.

The weight Kessler had in the **construction of contemporary Trentino** can hardly be overestimated. Yet, in the face of such a relevant experience for Trentino's history, one of the protagonists of this territory has received only limited attention from historical research. Therefore, the time has come to investigate Kessler's personal and political story with greater care and breadth, also in view of the approaching centenary of his birth, which took place in Cogolo on February 17, 1924.

The link between historical research and anniversaries actually deserves some clarification. In recent years, the influence exerted by the civil calendar on the agenda of historians has grown significantly. The celebration of anniversaries of various kinds increasingly guides research, to the point that some have spoken of a trend toward the "anniversarization" of historical discourse, identifying the "dictatorship of anniversaries" as an element that risks flattening the complex dimension of history. This is a trend that hides various pitfalls, but if approached with measure and rigor, anniversaries represent a useful opportunity to return to reflection on pages of the past that need to be rediscovered or interrogated from new questions.

In the case of research on the Kessler era, one element of marked relevance is that the [Kessler's personal archives](#), kept at the **Trento Provincial Archives**, are now available for consultation. This is an impressive amount of materials, which make it possible to inaugurate a new season of study that will help not only to reconstruct with greater precision – and, so to speak, from within – the articulated public parabola of the Trentino politician, but to give further depth to the history of Trentino autonomy, to which Kessler made a decisive contribution.

Once in a while, then, the commemorative needs of the civil calendar pair well to those of historical research, fostering the revival of interest in the study of a decisive phase in the history of our region, still awaiting full historicization.

Over the next two years, the [Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico](#) will develop a comprehensive research project on the topic. Thanks to a grant obtained from the [Fondazione Caritro](#) and collaboration with the Center For European Studies at the University of Verona, the Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino and the Trento Provincial Archives, the project [Alle radici del Trentino contemporaneo. Bruno Kessler e le sfide della modernizzazione](#) (At the Roots of Contemporary Trentino. Bruno Kessler and the Challenges of Modernization) will allow for an in-depth study of Kessler's political story, linking it to the development processes that the national and international political community promoted between the 1960s and 1970s.

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