
Poland: An Illustrated History by Cyprian Pogonowski (2000) 256 pages.



Hippocrene Books of New York has been commendably active for many years in publishing valuable books in English that are related to Poland. This time it has launched a series of short history books of other countries such as England, France, Korea, Mexico, Russia, and Spain. Their length, in a small book format, is limited to about 200 pages including 50 photos, and this restriction presents quite a challenge for authors. Thus Pogonowski in writing his book faced a formidable problem as to what should be included and what must be greatly shortened or eliminated. He was also expected to review Poland's cultural history covering literature, religion, social structure, the arts, and even science and architecture. As the publishers tell us, this book is meant for the "traveler, the student, and history enthusiast," implying that the expected reader is likely to have only a casual interest in thing Polish. Truly serious readers have a much broader selection at their disposal.

Accordingly we must view this work as a very popular version of Poland's 1,000 - year history. Its clarity would be greatly enhanced if the non-historical subjects were discussed in separate chapters because often they contain details, which even for the Polish student are of limited interest. For example: a Polish printer worked in Naples in 1478; the export of Polish wheat was poor in 1520 Janicki wrote political poems in Latin in 1540; Pompeo Ferrari built a church in a small town of Gostyń around 1700 etc.

Still, this book is a laudable effort, and various charts and maps offer interesting supplemental information. The same is true of certain statistics that are a part of maps and of which we are normally not aware. For example, in the year 1000 there were one million Poles; shortly before the Crusades in 1200, Europe claimed 25 million people, and at the time of Stefan Batory there were 100 million Europeans, with 11 million Poles. Today Europe has 750 million people, with 38 million in Poland. Lastly, at the time of the 2nd Partition in 1792, Poland had more inhabitants than the United States. Of course, one cannot resist wondering how all these people were counted ten centuries ago.

George Suboczewski