In the nineteenth century the lands of the old Polish state were divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Western Ukraine was part of the Habsburg province of Galicia and the site of Polish as well as Ukrainian national movements. Limited attempts by representatives of both nations to compromise were overshadowed by rivalry that grew more intense with the passing decades as each side lobbied for Austrian support and claimed political dominance in Eastern Galicia. In 1918 the Polish state was reconstituted and fought a war against the newly formed Western Ukrainian People's Republic (in Ukrainian: ZUNR). Within a year, Poland defeated the Ukrainians and established its eastern border on the Zbruch (Zbrucz) River.

Political parties differed over the location of Poland's eastern frontiers, but the overwhelming majority of Poles thought in terms of an historic rather than an ethnic Poland, and debate revolved around how far east the country's border should be. Most agreed it should include Western Ukraine, and disapproved of Józef Pilsudski's treaty with the Ukrainian People's Republic and the subsequent war with Soviet Russia. Pilsudski's ambition to form a Polish-dominated Eastern European federation that included an independent Ukraine without Galicia came to nought when a militarily exhausted Poland accepted Lenin's offer of peace in 1920. The Riga Treaty of 1921 and the decision of the Council of Ambassadors in 1923 established the Soviet-Polish border on the Zbruch River and recognized Polish control over some Ukrainian regions. Western Ukraine (renamed Małopolska Wschodnia) was divided into three provinces, while Volyn (Wołyń) was made a fourth.
Roughly one-third of interwar Poland’s inhabitants were non-Polish. The 5 to 6 million Ukrainians living in eastern Poland made up 14 to 15 percent of the total population. In Western Ukraine and Volyn Poles made up 40 and 18 percent, respectively. Poland’s eastern provinces had the lowest level of urbanization and industrialization. Poles dominated the local administration, police and army, the large landowner class, the professions, and the working class, and they constituted over 50 percent of the two largest cities Lviv (Łwów) and Ternopil (Tarnopol).

Polish leaders had varying opinions about non-Poles. On the right, National Democrats argued for complete assimilation and advocated Polish colonization and bilingual schools in Western Ukraine. They made no claims on Ukrainian territories in the USSR. Spokesmen recognized the existence of non-Poles but claimed their native consciousness was low and should be molded into a Polish national consciousness. Moderate socialists grouped around the Polish Socialist party (PPS) supported cultural autonomy and even discussed the possibility of territorial autonomy for Western Ukraine. They also supported Pilsudski’s ambition to create a bloc under Polish hegemony including a Ukrainian state without Western Ukrainian lands. State policy, despite obligations imposed by international treaties, and pressure from the minorities and Polish liberals, was directed at integration and assimilation of all non-Poles except Germans. This included support for efforts to latinize the Uniate Church and opposition to Ukrainization of and broader lay authority within the Orthodox Church. On the other hand, after Pilsudski’s 1926 coup, the government recognized the Ukrainian National Republic Government-in-Exile as part of its covert strategy to destabilize Soviet rule.¹

The Hitler-Stalin pact gave Western Ukraine to Moscow and established the German-USSR border along the San River. In 1945 a new Poland-USSR border was drawn along the Bug River, and by 1950 Poland’s population, for the first time in 600 years, was overwhelmingly Polish. The Polish minority in Ukraine and the Ukrainian minority in Poland are today insignificant numerically, socially, and economically.

In interwar Poland perhaps the first to call on Polish historians to keep studying the history of the “lost regions” was K. Sochaniewicz. At the IV Polish Historians Conference, he remarked that Russians published more on central and Western Ukraine than did Poles because they took the regions’ archives after the Partitions. He urged Polish historians to counter selective Russian and Ukrainian publications of these documents with their own “objective” selections and to retrieve lost archives.² Observations on the interpretation of Ukraine’s past were made in 1933 by O. Górka, who pointed