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# Poles and Ukrainians: a love-hate relationship that turned to love

Poles and Ukrainians have a history of border wars, common enemies, and invasion. And yet today, the two regions share so much.



by Jan Vladimir Ledóchowski — 02-04-2022 11:03 in Politics, World



Vladimir the Great. Image by Александр Красовский from Pixabay



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### *Part 1: Ancient Ukraine, the First Russia*

**A thousand years ago, today's Poland and today's Ukraine were proud independent states. Ukraine as we know it was called Russia in Latin, Rossia in Greek and *Ruś* in Polish. Its ancient Slavonic language, the ancestor of Ukrainian, was known as *Ruski* (a bit like 'roose-ki'), and its legal code the *Ruska Pravda*.**



### Włodzimierz Wielki = Wladimir the Great, statue in Novgorod (1)

In 966AD, Poland under Prince Mieszko I converted to a Christianity that came from Rome, making him a Roman Catholic. Just over 20 years later, in 988AD, Vladimir the Great, Grand Prince of Kyiv, converted to a Christianity that came from Constantinople, so his state, the principality of Kyiv, was Orthodox and its rites were in Old Slavonic.

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My family, usually known as Polish, stretches its ancestry back to Halka the 'convertor', who according to legend was Vladimir's ambassador who brought Christianity back from Constantinople. The state's huge territory included today's Moscow and Lviv and reached Vilnius (capital of today's Lithuania) – but these cities did not yet exist and were founded later.

## Border wars followed by an equal footing

There were border wars between Poland and *Ruś* but nothing exceptionally brutal, largely due to the great distance between the regions; there are 500 miles between Kraków to Kyiv, and Poland had Germans to the west and the *Ruś* had Tartars to the east.

There then came several hundred years when the two states were equal partners. The Kyiv state had been destroyed by Tartar invasion but then re-emerged as the bulk of the enormous Grand Duchy known as Lithuania, which stretched from the Baltic Sea to nearly the Black Sea. The majority of the population were *Ruski*.

## Defeating the common enemy: the Teutonic knights



Poland and Lithuania, 15th century. Polska i Litwa, XV wiek. (1)

The two states had a common enemy, the Teutonic knights, who were mostly German but often included crusaders from other western countries. The knights invaded both Poland and Lithuania under the pretext of converting the locals to Christianity.

At the Union of Krowo in 1385, the Grand Duke agreed to marry the young Queen of Poland and became King of both countries united under the same crown, similar to how England and Scotland had the same monarch from James I in 1603 onwards but continued for some time as separate countries.

The partnership between the two states saw the defeat of the Teutonic knights at the historic Battle of Grunwald in 1410. My family, from the little town known as Leduchów in Polish or Lediwiv in Ukrainian, was there.

## The name 'Russia' was taken by the Prince of Moscow

In 1547 Ivan the Terrible, Prince of Moscow, decided to pinch the 600-year-old name 'Russia' from Kyiv for his own state and declare himself 'Tsar', which comes from Caesar. From then on, the Tsars of Russia supported by the patriarch of the 'Russian' Orthodox Church, did everything they could to build a kind of new Roman Empire of the Slavic and Orthodox worlds.

## Polish Commonwealth is created

In 1569, Poland and Lithuania signed the Lublin Act of Union, creating the so-called Republic of Two Nations, sometimes known in English as the Polish Commonwealth. Similar to the Act of Union signed by England and Scotland in 1707, it provided for a federal state with a shared parliament, though they still had separate laws and separate armies.

This was the start of a gradual deterioration in the relationship between Poles and *Ruski* (the future Ukrainians) which continued for nearly four hundred years.

## Grand Duchy of Lithuania is divided

First, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was split in two. The northern part comprising mostly of today's Belarus and Lithuania, remained as the Duchy and was formally the 'second nation', but being much smaller than Poland, was effectively the junior partner.

The southern part, including the province of Kyiv and much of today's Ukraine (except the Lviv area, which had belonged to Poland for centuries), was transferred from the Grand Duchy to the Kingdom of Poland.

Noble landowners in the Commonwealth parliament were rapidly Polonised. So many leading families like my own soon considered themselves Polish, much to the resentment of the *Ruski* serfs.





## Poland at a watershed as Russia's war with Ukraine intensifies

BY WIKTOR MOSZCZYNSKI © 19 MARCH 2022

### Religious conflict

Then at the Union of Brest (Brześć in Polish) in 1596, with the Counter Reformation in full swing in much of Europe, and the *Ruś* fearing Russian domination, the Catholic Church encouraged the Orthodox clergy of *Ruś* to convert to a new church known as the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church.

It would keep its Old Slavonic liturgy, but would owe its allegiance to Rome. The pressure to convert was sometimes rather brutal and a vociferous minority opposed it, dividing the *Ruś* into Uniates and DisUniates.

Bogdan Chmielnicki, leader of the biggest rebellion against the Poles, helped Russia take eastern parts of Ukraine including Kyiv. Poland accepted this in a 1686 treaty, so Eastern *Ruś* was no longer in the Commonwealth. The rebellions in the Western Polish part were in the end crushed.

### *Ruś* become Polonised

By 1697 the Lithuanian and *Ruś* elites were so Polonised that they did not use their *Liberum Veto* (right to veto laws) to oppose the abolition of *Ruski* as an official language by the Commonwealth parliament on the pretext that it could "no longer be understood by the Polish genius". The ordinary *Ruś* discovered that in the Republic of Two Nations the language of their nation was no longer official.

A few years later, in another attempt to create an independent *Ruś* or Ukrainian state, Ivan (Jan) Mazepa Kołodyński, a *Ruski* nobleman highly educated in Poland, allied himself with King Charles XII of Sweden, who was invading Saxony, Poland and Russia at the time. But he and Charles XII were defeated by Russia at the Battle of Poltava, east of Kyiv, in 1709.

The battle had far-reaching consequences: Russia was now a superpower; Tsar Peter was ever after known as 'the Great'; the Swedish Empire was over; King Charles XII spent five years in Turkey whence his cook brought back the recipe for meatballs, today a Swedish national dish; and Mazepa became a romantic Ukrainian national hero inspiring a Tchaikovsky opera.

### *Ruś* / Ukraine was not considered a formal state

*Ruś* or the future Ukraine was divided in two – the western part being Polonised and the eastern part being Russianised. It was widely considered 'not a proper country', an accusation repeated by Putin today, and Ukrainian independence was put off for nearly three centuries.

It was then Poland's turn to be 'not a proper country'. From 1795, the whole Commonwealth was divided into three partitions. The western part was absorbed by Prussia and subjected to Germanisation, while the central and eastern part, including Warsaw, Lithuania, Belarus and far Eastern Ukraine, were all part of the Russian Empire and subjected to Russianisation. Russian domination was considered the worst and there were at least three major Polish uprisings against it, all of which failed, until the First World War.

## The Austrian Partition – “Galicia”

The Southern part of the old Commonwealth, stretching from Kraków far into today's Western Ukraine, was now in the **Austrian Empire**. It was known as Galicia and its capital was Lviv (Lwów in Polish). Conditions in Galicia were the mildest of the partitions.

### The Partitions of Poland, 1772-1795



New province, 'West Galicia' is founded.

Some self-government was introduced in 1871, after which the Viceroy was Polish, and by 1907 there was universal suffrage. Poles in Galicia were awarded the status of 'ruling race' in the Empire, along with the Magyars (Hungarians) and of course the German speaking Austrians themselves. The penultimate Emperor, Francis-Joseph, was portrayed as a kindly old uncle.

## Education in different languages

The elite considered itself mostly Polish and there was a process of re-Polonisation. The three universities, Kraków, Lwów University and Lwów *Politechnika*, taught in Polish. Most schools taught in Polish and a few in *Ruski*.

The peasants were mixed everywhere but more likely to be Polish and Roman Catholic in Western Galicia, and *Ruski* and Uniate or Orthodox in Eastern Galicia. There were effectively four languages: Polish, *Ruski*, Yiddish and bureaucratic German.

## Ukraine becomes 'Ukraine'

On the principle of 'divide and rule', Austria permitted the re-emergence of *Ruski* as the new Ukrainian language, with a revived literary and cultural tradition. The **name 'Ukraine'** ('u kraina' meaning perhaps 'on the edge' or 'beyond the border', initially the name of the Eastern Cossack region) became widely used.

The Poles conspired to make Galicia the core of a new independent Poland and the Ukrainians conspired to make Galicia the core of a new independent Ukraine.

Poland's national anthem started "*Poland is not yet lost*". The *Ruś* composed a new anthem "*Ukraine is not yet lost*". Some traditional songs in the two languages use the same tunes.

(1) Sources: [Author's family website](#).

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# Poles and Ukrainians: the emergence of today's Ukraine

Poles and Ukrainians have a long history of love and hate. Since WWII, relations between the states have thawed as their cultures are similar.



by **Jan Vladimir Ledóchowski** — 03-04-2022 10:10 in **Culture, Politics, World**



Lviv Cathedral, Rbrechko, CC BY-SA 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons



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Part I of this article is [available here](#).

**The First and Second World Wars caused ruptures in Polish-Ukrainian relations. As soon as the German, Austrian and Russian empires collapsed, the re-emerged Poland assembled its armies and fought and won wars of independence against both Germany and Russia, retaking much of today's Lithuania, Belarus and Western Ukraine, which were all, according to the Poles, part of the historic Commonwealth.**

## Conflict over Lviv

But the Poles, much to their surprise, had to fight the Ukrainians for Lviv, which both sides considered their own historic city. Further east, with support from Poland, the Ukrainians tried to recreate an independent country around Kyiv but did not have time to create a strong army to fight Russia. They were defeated and Eastern Ukraine was reincorporated into the Russian Empire, better known as the Soviet Union.

The eastern areas of the new inter-war Poland included many *Ruski* peasants considering themselves Ukrainian and there was some much resented aggressive 'pacification' by Polish forces. All major minorities in Poland – German, Jewish and Ukrainian – vigorously defended their cultures and there were clashes with mainstream Polish nationalism.

My father used to write articles in the Polish émigré press criticising racism in South Africa, and one day received a letter from an old friend in Australia. It turned out he was a Ukrainian whom my father saved from being beaten up by a Polish nationalist mob at Lviv University in around 1930.

With time things settled down, especially when the Ukrainians saw that things were far worse in the east, under Russian domination, where Stalin imposed his vicious dictatorship and was responsible for a terrible famine in the 1930s.

## Eastern Poland is invaded by Russia





In September 1939, Germany and Russia both attacked Poland and split it between them. Eastern Poland / Western Ukraine was once again under the domination of Russia. Stalin promoted the fiction of Ukraine being a nearly independent Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union and encouraged anti-Polish resentment.

In some places it did not work. There were cases of Polish landlords being hidden from the Soviet security police, the NKVD, by their farmworkers or by Orthodox priests. My grandparents, Polish landlords, went into hiding in Lviv where their *Ruski* farmworkers secretly supplied them with food and clothing.

My grandfather, a retired Polish general, was never betrayed and so did not end up being shot by the NKVD (later known as the KGB) in the Katyń massacres like so many other members of the elite. However, there we

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examples of Ukrainians betraying Poles to the NKVD. Jews were considered Polish and suffered alongside them – the elite shot at Katyń (including Jewish officers and the Jewish deputy mayor of Lviv), and hundreds of thousands deported to Siberia.

## Hitler invades Russia

In June 1941, Hitler attacked Russia and so the whole of Ukraine came under German occupation. Initially Nazi propaganda called on the Ukrainians for support against Polish domination and against the Jews, many of whom were betrayed if not massacred by the SS or transported to death camps anyway.

As it gradually became clear that Germany would lose the war, the Poles and Ukrainians ended up fighting over who would take over the area once the Germans were gone. The Ukrainian Partisan Army, UPA, attacked the local Polish population in many towns and villages including one of the country houses owned by my family, Smordwa, where they were eventually beaten off after a bitter fight.

The number of Polish victims is variously estimated at around 50,000, and many Poles accuse the Ukrainians of outright genocide. The Polish film *Wołyń* highlights the extraordinary cruelty with which men, women and children were tortured and killed. My wife's uncle was taken by the UPA and never seen again, presumed murdered.

## The Iron Curtain descends across Europe and the Cold War begins

The division of Europe into West and East agreed by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin at the Yalta conference in February 1945, completely changed the picture yet again, and triggered a progressive improvement in Polish-Ukrainian relations ever since.

The 'iron curtain' ran down the middle of Germany and practically all peoples to the East of it were now under the domination of Russia, either as Communist states or as members of the Soviet Union itself. Churchill made it quite clear to the Polish government in exile in London and in hiding in Warsaw that they should accept the new order.



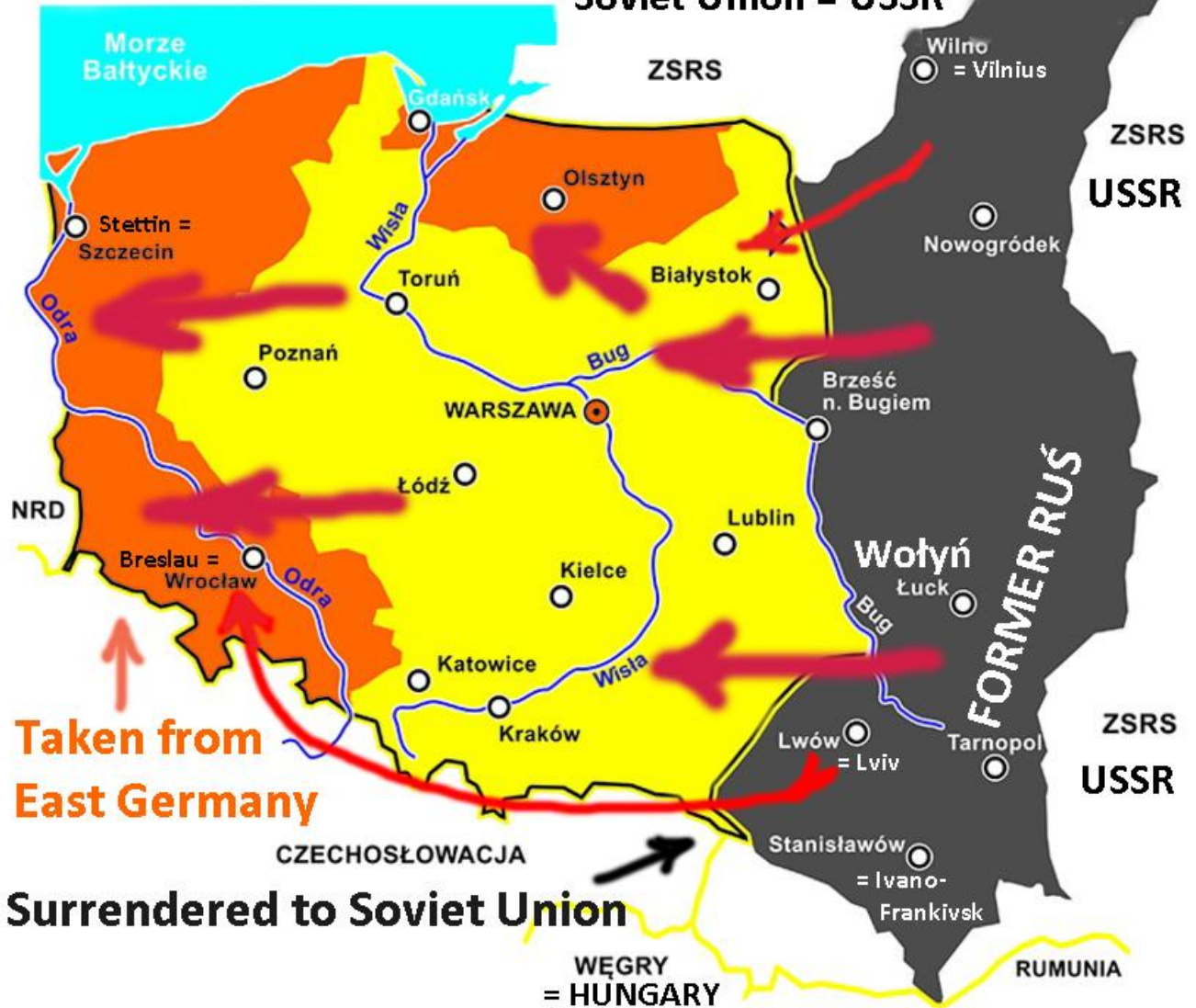
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### Poles and Ukrainians: a love-hate relationship that turned to love

BY JAN VLADIMIR LEDÓCHOWSKI © 2 APRIL 2022

## Poland is moved West in 1945

Soviet Union = USSR





## Lack of support from the West

Polish resistance forces totalling around 150,000, which carried on fighting for independence from Russia (known in Polish as the 'Cursed'), received no help from the West and perhaps 20,000 were killed. The UK government connived in the Russian pretence that the Katyń massacres had been perpetrated by the Germans.

Poland was moved Westwards into areas that had been German for centuries, and Ukraine was moved Westwards into areas that had been Polish for centuries. Most of Lviv, including museums and universities, ended up in the former German city of Breslau, now renamed Wrocław. Many Ukrainians in the new Poland were moved the other way, into the new Ukraine.

## A thaw in Polish-Ukrainian relations



Yalta Conference, 1945. From left: Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin. US government photographer, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Then Polish – Ukrainian relations, both in the Communist bloc and in exile, started improving. Like the East Germans, they considered Stalin and Russia, with the shameful co-operation of Churchill and Roosevelt, as primarily responsible for their plight – so they were victims in common. They were also no longer minorities in each other's countries.

Ukraine's continued existence as a culture, language and country was no longer being threatened by a Polish elite, but by Russians being imported into the country to 'Russianise' it. Poles also had to learn Russian at scl

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Suffering under Stalinism, some Ukrainians looked back to pre-war Poland with nostalgia.



Both Poles and Ukrainians all loved 'their' beautiful city of Lviv. 'Polish' historians at Wrocław University worked together with 'Ukrainian' historians at Lviv University.

When I visited Lviv in the early 2000s many locals told me they were really Polish and their parents or grandparents loved Lviv so much they refused to be transported by Stalin to Wrocław.

Many people living round Lviv watch Polish TV from over the border. When I asked the hotel receptionist where I could find a memorial to the Polish University professors murdered by the Germans in 1941, she looked puzzled and then brightened and replied, in quite good Polish, "Oh, you mean the Ukrainian professors murdered by the Germans!"

Over 20 percent of Ukrainians are Greek Catholics or Uniates today, and they together with the remaining Roman Catholics take their religion and allegiance to the Pope very seriously, strengthening their links with Poland and the West generally.

## Similarities between Polish and Ukrainian cultures

An example of the historic overlap between these nations is the poet Adam Mickiewicz. His patriotic poem, composed in exile in Paris and learnt by every Pole, starts (my rough translation):

*Lithuania my country,  
You are like health.  
We only really appreciate you,  
When we lose you.*

Mickiewicz' poem is addressed to 'Lithuania' but he had in mind something much bigger. His family home is today a national museum in Belarus. His statue is still standing today in Lviv. The rolling fields and forests of his poem are throughout former *Ruś* or 'Greater Lithuania'. They all love him.

## **Togetherness emerges in Polish-Ukrainian relations**

Towards the end of the Communist years, a feeling of togetherness spread among dissidents in all countries, including even Russia, who were in contact with each other in their struggles. As it happens, Poland under the iconic figure of Wałęsa was first to overthrow its regime, which earned it a lot of respect from the other countries including Ukraine, which followed with its so-called Orange Revolution and then Maidan Revolution.

Once the regimes were overthrown, border issues threatened to spoil the euphoria. But reunited Germany made it very clear that it accepted the cession of its eastern territories to Poland as a permanent reality.

## **Poland accepted the cession of Lviv to Ukraine**

Ukrainians were very anxious about Lviv because of its old Polish connections, but Poland very wisely took the same position as Germany: it accepted the cession of these lands to Ukraine as permanent. Poles travelled to Ukraine to visit their old properties and to do business. Ukrainians came to Poland to work as nurses or builders, and as hard-working fellow Slavs made a good impression. The war time generation is dying off and people are forgetting the atrocities.

## **The legacy of Vladimir the Great**



Włodzimierz Wielki = Vladimir the Great, statue in Novgorod (1)

But through it all, the memory of Vladimir the Great of the First Russia continues to loom over the former *Ruś* lands. *Włodzimierz* in Polish or *Volodymyr* in Ukrainian, it originally meant power and peace, or respected for his power. The president of Ukraine is named after him and no doubt considers it his historic mission to ensure that this time the Kyiv state will not be crushed, but will survive and flourish.

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crushed, but will survive and flourish.

The President of Russia is also named after him and all the signs are that, with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, which regards the current conflict as a 'Holy war', he attacked the other Vladimir because he wishes to recreate an Empire of all Eastern Europe, with Moscow and himself as a quasi-Tsar at the centre.

Poles have been invaded by Russia many times over the centuries; they know what it is like, fear more attacks in the future, and are giving Ukrainians all the support they can.

(1) Source: [Author's family website](#).

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