WEST SHOWS IGNORANCE OF FORMER SOVIET STATES

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By **Scott Taylor**, The Chronicle Herald, Nova Scotia, 13 April 2014

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This can, in part, be explained by our education system teaching us the British imperial version of history, and the fact that from 1918 until 1991, our geography class maps showed only one vast red region collectively labelled the Soviet Union.

As such, we were taught that the capital of this federation was Moscow and that, as communists, they were our Cold War enemies. Few, other than scholars of Russian studies, would have understood the deeply rooted historical ethnic, cultural and religious divisions that existed within the various Soviet republics.

It was only following the Soviet Union's economic collapse and dissolution that long-suppressed factional animosity bubbled to the surface. As the various republics declared themselves independent in 1991, it quickly became evident that the former Soviet administrative boundaries did not exactly conform to the ethnic composition of the region.

This, in turn, led to a number of territories declaring themselves independent from the new republics. Within the boundaries of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the largely Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh declared itself an independent state.

Following Georgia's declaration of independence, ethnic Ossetians and Abkhazians each declared their own autonomous regions. A similar division occurred in the newly created Moldavia, wherein the ethnic Russians in the eastern portion of the republic declared their own autonomous stated called Transnistria.

In all these cases, the immediate result was bloody inter-factional violence and widespread ethnic cleansing. As these conflicts raged, the western media remained focused on the similarly violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, despite the fact that the civil wars raging in these

former Soviet republics were creating an equal amount of human suffering, they remained little known and even less understood without the benefit of media coverage and analysis.

By 1994, all of these had become what is termed "frozen conflicts." Ceasefires were declared, but no actual peace agreements were brokered. More importantly, not a single nation formally recognized any of the breakaway territories.

That changed dramatically in August 2008, when Georgian troops attempted to forcibly reclaim the region of South Ossetia. At the height of this crisis, Russia intervened on behalf of the Ossetians, bloodily repulsed the Georgians and then officially recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

At the time, most western media outlets echoed the political leadership in vilifying the Russians and condemning their "invasion" of Georgia. Most casual observers had no understanding of the complexity of this conflict and had no idea that ethnic Ossetians are completely distinct in their language and culture from ethnic Georgians.

Just before the crisis in South Ossetia, Canada had been one of the most strident voices urging the inclusion of both Georgia and Ukraine within the NATO alliance. In retrospect, the decision not to include these two countries in NATO was a wise one.

Under the terms of NATO's mutual defence agreement, Russia's military action in South Ossetia in 2008 and the recent annexation of Crimea would have forced the alliance into World War III.

Given the massive potential consequences of escalating these simmering conflicts, it is clearly apparent that western leaders need to fully educate themselves on the complexities of the divisions, loyalties and economic impacts before simply taking sides.

The Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions have historically been flashpoints at the vortex of three former empires — Ottoman, Persian and czarist Russia. These entities are represented in the forms of Turkey, Iran and the Russian Federation, but there are now four new independent republics and four self-proclaimed, unrecognized independent regions complicating the equation — without including Ukraine and Crimea.

Add in the fact that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline from Azerbaijan through Georgia pumps over a million barrels of oil a day into Turkey and that 40 per cent of western Europe's oil and natural gas are pumped through pipelines across Ukraine, and suddenly the strategic global importance of this very challenging region becomes far too evident.

For Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to plunge Canada into the declared position of a "player" in the Ukraine crisis was foolhardy. They should have started by doing their homework and viewing this as a sensitive regional issue with potentially catastrophic consequences rather than fall back on their own simplistic viewpoint, which is "Russia bad."