Teaching Eastern Europe Through Literature and Film

The Web is a great source of all kinds of information. For example, this site has a virtual tour of Hermitage: http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/08/hm88_0.html

All the suggested books and movies listed below are available in English through Amazon. The movies are also available through Netflix. YouTube is also a good source, although there can be quality/copyright issues.

Suggested Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian Sources

Ivo Andrić The Bridge on the Drina
Andrić received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961. This book is a bit longer than most of the others on this list, but as it is a series of self-contained vignettes, it is also possible to read excerpts.
From Amazon: “The Bridge on the Drina is a vivid depiction of the suffering history has imposed upon the people of Bosnia from the late 16th century to the beginning of World War I. As we seek to make sense of the current nightmare in this region, this remarkable, timely book serves as a reliable guide to its people and history.”

Borislav Pekić The Time of Miracles
A full-length novel which can also be read as a series of stand-alone chapters. Each section retells a story from the Gospels from the point of view characters such as Simon of Cyrene and Judas. A compelling and challenging version of the Passion story that attacks dogmatic attachment to ideology. Could be read in conjunction with The Last Temptation of Christ.

Dubravka Ugrešić In The Jaws of Life
A collection of novellas and short stories. The title novella is a “women’s story” written in the form of a dress pattern, inviting readers to contemplate what makes up “women’s fiction” and “women’s art.” Could be read in conjunction with Sex and the City.

Slobodan Selenić Premeditated Murder
From Amazon: “The setting is tempestuous Belgrade during two dark eras: the Communist takeover in 1944 and the war between the Serbs and the Croats in 1994. The heroines are two Jelenas, grandmother and granddaughter, who have both had the misfortune of being in love during evil times…This novel, the late Yugoslavian author's final work, is a moving argument against war as well as an engrossing tale of romantic passion and irretrievable loss.”

Fine Dead Girls (Film, 2002)
Set in post-Yugoslav, post-war Croatia, this movie shows the violence still simmering just under the surface in modern Croatia, as a lesbian couple move in to an apartment building that is a microcosm for the country, setting off a reaction amongst the inhabitants that leaves one girl raped and the other dead. A good movie about contemporary Croatia, but for mature audiences.
Suggested Czech sources
Karel Čapek *R.U.R.*
The work that introduced the word “robot” to English, this play describes a futuristic society in which robots are the slaves of humans—until they rebel. Could be paired with *Battlestar Galactica*.

*Kolya* (film, 1997)
This movie won the 1997 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. A touching story of a middle-aged Czech bachelor who suddenly finds himself responsible for a Russian boy after the boy’s mother flees to Germany. Gives a glimpse of the differences and tension between Eastern Bloc neighbors who may all seem the same to Westerners. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfVSvI4fo-s&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfVSvI4fo-s&feature=related)

*Czech Dream* (film, 2007)
A documentary made by two Czech film students who create an advertising campaign for a fake hypermarket and lure people to its fake opening day sale. Explores the advertising industry and the ease with which people can be exploited and manipulated through advertising. Could be paired with any reality TV show. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVubd4N4i7M&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVubd4N4i7M&feature=related)

Suggested Russian Sources
Alexander Pushkin *Eugene Onegin*
Russia’s first and most beloved novel, this verse tale of star-crossed lovers is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand Russian culture (most Russians memorize lengthy passages in school). The translation by James Falen is generally considered the best, while Nabokov provided an extensive commentary (sold as a separate volume).

Mikhail Lermontov *A Hero of Our Time*
This short novel, which is both the epitome of Russian Romanticism and signals the turn to Realism, can also be read as a collection of stand-alone short stories. Set in the Caucasus, including what is now Chechnya, this novel deals with issues of colonization, friendship, gender, and free will vs. determinism. Could be paired with anything by Byron.

Karolina Pavlova *A Double Life*
Russia’s only significant female writer in the 19th century, Karolina Pavlova’s career was stifled by discrimination against women and Germans. Nonetheless, she produced this gem of a short novel about a young woman who believes she is choosing, through her own free will, to marry the man of her dreams. But, Pavlova argues, “free will” is meaningless in someone who has never learned to think freely. Pavlova’s sharp prose and trenchant social commentary are reminiscent of Jane Austen.

Fyodor Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*
This novella launched Dostoevsky’s mature literary career and also, like *A Double Life*, takes up the issues of free will vs. determinism, as well as the question of whether or not people are obliged to act in their own and others’ best interest. An attack on Chernyshevsky’s utopian vision of the future in *What is to be Done?*, this novella counters with a dystopian vision that
would be developed in Zamyatin’s *We* and Orwell’s *1984*. Could also be paired with *A Clockwork Orange*.

Leo Tolstoy *Family Happiness, The Kreutzer Sonata, The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (all available in Perennial Classic’s *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*). Three novellas that cover much of the same ground as Tolstoy’s masterpiece *Anna Karenina*, but at a fraction of the page count. *Family Happiness* (from the beginning of Tolstoy’s career) and *The Kreutzer Sonata* (from the end) both center on the issue of marriage, while *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* discusses the meaning of life and death.

Ivan Turgenev *Fathers and Sons*
Discusses the new radical generation of the mid-19th century, as well the emancipation of the serfs (for another look at serf life, see Turgenev’s *A Sportsman’s Sketches*). This classic novel is often popular with students.

Anton Chekhov *The Cherry Orchard* and stories
Chekhov’s last play, *The Cherry Orchard* is a story about the passing of the old, aristocratic way of life and the arrival of the 20th century. An impoverished estate must be sold, and is bought by a former serf. Chekhov, the grandson of a serf, also has several short stories about serf life, including the harrowing post-emancipation trilogy *Peasant Women, Peasants, and In the Ravine*. Could be paired with Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*.

Isaac Babel *Red Cavalry Tales*
Can be read either as a cycle or as separate short stories. A semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical account of a Jew serving with a Cossack regiment during the (Soviet) Civil War. This disturbing collection of tales is often a favorite of students.

Lydia Chukovskaya *Sofia Petrovna*
The story of a woman whose son disappears during the Great Purge, this novella tells the story of the Stalinist purges and the camps from the point of view of the family members of those who disappeared.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*
The fictionalized account of a single day in a Soviet labor camp by a camp survivor, this book sent off shock waves in the USSR and abroad when it was published. Solzhenitsyn subsequently received the Nobel Prize for Literature, and spent decades in exile.

Varlam Shalamov *Kolyma Tales*
Another camp survivor, Shalamov spent 17 years in Kolyma, one of the most brutal of the Gulag camps. The stories, which can read individually or as a cycle, have a harsh lyricism that manages to convey both the horror of the camps and the possibility of redemption. Chukovskaya, Solzhenitsyn, and Shalamov could of course all be read in conjunction with Holocaust literature.
Natalya Baranskaya A Week Like Any Other
The title story of this collection is a novella describing the typical week of a typical Soviet woman attempting to juggle work and family. It shows the double burden that Soviet women bore and post-Soviet women continue to bear, expected to work full-time while still responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This story will probably resonant deeply with working mothers around the world. A Week Like Any Other was chosen for the 1989 Feminist Book Fortnight Twenty Selected Title list in the UK.

Viktor Pelevin Homo Zapiens (Also known as “Generation P”)
***I have only read excerpts of this book, but Pelevin is the literary star of this generation***
From the Amazon review: “The subject is Tatarky, a former literature student peddling cigarettes from a tiny Moscow kiosk. A chance encounter leads to Tatarky’s employment as a copywriter for promotional videos for nouveau riche gangsters. (One key skill described is how to get paid before the client is murdered.) Soon he's spending all his time creating Russian funhouse-mirror versions of American ads and reading vapid American texts extolling the virtues of ”comparative positioning.”* Probably for mature students only.

Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future (Film, 1973)
This amusing scifi/comedy can’t be called “great art,” but it switches back and forth between the Moscow of the 1970s and the Moscow of Ivan the Terrible, and is full of tongue-in-cheek references to both historical eras. My students found it hilarious.

The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath (Film, 1975)
This (very long) romantic comedy of errors/musical gives a fairly accurate depiction of Soviet life in the 1970s, with its identical buildings and cities all over the country, and also shows typical scenes of Russian life such as the bathhouse and New Year’s celebrations. It is still shown on TV every year before New Year’s, and is an essential part of modern Russian culture. Could be paired with Glee.

Prisoner of the Mountains (Film, 1997)
This Oscar-nominated film is a remake of Tolstoy’s Prisoner of the Caucasus, set during the current conflict in Chechnya. Two Russian soldiers are taken prisoner by a Chechen who wants to exchange them for his own son, held prisoner by the Russians. Full of beautiful Caucasian scenery, this movie depicts the tragedy of Chechnya and touches upon the unpleasant nature of Russian military service, as well as the practice of Russian mothers traveling to war zones to rescue their sons. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-8TOmQpWug&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-8TOmQpWug&feature=related)

The Cuckoo (Film, 2003)
Won domestic awards for best director and best female and male roles. Set in Lapland during WWII, it is the story of Finnish suicide sniper (a “cuckoo”) and a Soviet soldier arrested by SMERSH (the WWII KGB). They both escape and end up taking shelter with a Saami woman. None of them speak each other’s language, and miscommunication almost has fatal consequences before the Russian and Finn learn to set aside their mistrust of each other. Beautiful shots of Northern scenery, and a compelling story about a side of the war Americans may know little about. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dow9SRj9A0g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dow9SRj9A0g)