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Notorious 19th-Century Moscow Prison Will be Closed, Official Says

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Russian prison officials have announced plans to close the infamous Butyrka prison in central Moscow and relocate its inmates to the city's outskirts.

Styled as a brick fortress, the 19th-century Butyrka prison has held a slew of notable figures behind its bars, from persecuted Soviet-era writers Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Isaak Babel to Adolf Hitler's nephew Heinrich. Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in Russian custody in 2009, spent most of his last months at the facility.

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"A decision was reached to close Butyrka," the deputy head of Russia's prison system, Valery Maximenko, said in an interview with the Moskovsky Komsomolets tabloid on Sunday.

Moscow's City Hall offered to bankroll construction of a new detention center for 5,000 inmates in one of two locations outside the Russian capital, he was quoted as saying.

"The pre-trial detention center will conform to all European standards," Maximenko said.

In addition to Butyrka, officials plan to close another detention center nicknamed Presnya. "So far, we've decided not to touch Matrosskaya Tishina," Maximenko said, referring to another infamous pre-trial detention center.

Magnitsky died in Matrosskaya Tishina, where he was moved shortly before his death.

Maximenko, the deputy chief of Russia's prison system, said construction of a new prison would start in early 2019 and could wrap up "maybe even within a year."

"The vacated buildings will be handed over to the city authorities. I hope Butyrka, as a building that holds historical value, won't be demolished," he said.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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