

Ponar (Ponary)

Site of mass extermination in Lithuania, located 6.2 miles from Vilna. From early summer 1941 to July 1944, 70,000-100,000 people were murdered at Ponar; most were Jews.

In 1940 and 1941 the Soviet government dug large pits at Ponar for fuel storage tanks, but they evacuated before they could complete the project. When the Germans occupied Lithuania in mid-1941, they used the pits for the mass murder of Jews from Vilna and the surrounding area, Soviet prisoners of war, and other enemies of the Nazis. The victims were brought to Ponar by the hundreds of thousands, by foot, truck, and train. SS men, German police, and Lithuanian collaborators then shot them to death in the pits. In the early phases of the Ponar exterminations, the victims were buried in the same pits where they had been shot. However, in September 1943, the Nazis began digging up the pits and burning the bodies in order to destroy all evidence of mass murder (see also *Aktion 1005*). About 80 Jewish prisoners were forced to do the job for them. On April 15, 1944 these prisoners heroically attempted to escape Ponar. Most were killed, but 15 successfully fled to the Partisans in the Rudninkai Forest.