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About an Attempt to Use the Cyrillic Alphabet for the Mongolian Language

Abstract

An attempt to create a written Mongolian language based on the Cyrillic script is linked to the missionary activities of Archbishop Nil (1799–1874) among the Buryat Mongols. On his initiative, several Christian liturgical books were translated into Mongolian and printed in St. Petersburg. However, Nil and his assistants did not take into account the discrepancy between written and spoken Mongolian language and transcribed every letter of the Mongolian written language with corresponding Cyrillic letters and thus did not in any way make the texts closer to the spoken language.

Keywords: Mongolian language, the Buryats, Christianity, Russian Orthodox Church, Christian missionaries, Cyrillic script

At present, the majority of the languages belonging to the Mongolian group uses the Cyrillic script: Kalmyk and Buryat languages in Russia and Mongolian language in Mongolia. In the course of their history, the Mongols used different types of script. However, it is the vertical Uighur script, which is commonly regarded as the national Mongolian writing system.

Cyrillic script – which is used for the Russian language – is state-protected in modern Russia. According to Russian legislation, only Cyrillic letters can be used for other languages spoken in Russia unless otherwise determined by the federal law.¹

¹ *Federal'nyi zakon 'O vnesenii dopolneniya v stat'yu 3 Zakona Rossiiskoi Federatsii 'O yazykakh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii'*, No. 165-FZ, Moscow 2002.

While people of Mongol origin, such as the Kalmyks and the Buryats, became Russian subjects as early as in the seventeenth century, the first attempts to produce texts in the Mongolian language using the Cyrillic script were undertaken only in the middle of the nineteenth century during the time of increasing missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, attempts to translate Christian texts into Mongolian were undertaken already in the first half of the nineteenth century. With the assistance of local erudite scholars, Isaac Jacob Schmidt was the first to translate the New Testament into Mongolian and Kalmyk languages. These translations were printed in Saint Petersburg in 1815–1827.

In 1817 several members of the London Missionary Society² received permission to settle among the Buryat Mongols. They were stationed in the town of Selenginsk in Eastern Siberia and have promoted Christian gospel for over 20 years. The main outcome of their activities was the complete translation of the Old Testament into Mongolian and its publication in 1834–1840.³ It should be noted that the Buryats were using not just Mongolian vertical script but also the literary Mongolian written language (Classical Mongolian).

Some of the Christianized peoples did not have writing systems of their own, and Russian missionaries applied the Cyrillic script for the purpose of the transcription of their languages.⁴ The principles for the translations of Christian works into native languages were laid down by a well-known Turkologist N.I. Il'minsky (Н.И. Ильминский; 1822–1891). He regarded it as desirable to use the Cyrillic script for Christianized peoples in order to distinguish them from their non-Christian tribesmen. The importance of this idea was demonstrated in the cases of the Turkic peoples of Russia: the Muslims used the Arabic script, while their brethren, who converted to Christianity, were taught to use the Cyrillic script.⁵

However, Mongolian peoples had their own script (*Uyürjün Mongyol bičig*) and Christian books were translated using this script. An attempt to create a written Buryat Mongolian language based on the Cyrillic script is linked to the missionary activities of Archbishop Nil (secular name Николай Федорович Исакович; 1799–1874). His life and works have not been forgotten and they still attract the attention of modern scholars.⁶ He was born in a village near the town of Mogilev (Polish: Mohylew) and studied there at the Orthodox Christian Seminary. He demonstrated good language skills and is said to have been communicating in Latin with a French doctor when Mogilev and the nearby

² For details see: A.V. Tivanenko, *Istoriya Angliyskoj dukhovnoj misii v Zabaikal'je*, Ulan-Ude 2009.

³ S. Rosén, *The Translation History of the Mongolian Bible*, "Mongolian Studies" 30/31 (2008/2009), pp. 23–27. For a detailed story of their activities in Siberia see: Charles Bawden, *Shamans, Lamas, and Evangelicals: The English Missionaries in Siberia*, London 1985.

⁴ For example, the Yakuts, the Chuvash people, the Komi-Permiaks, the Udmurts, the peoples of Tungus stock and even the Aleuts of Alaska.

⁵ A.B. Yefimov, *Očerki po istorii missionerstva Russkoi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi*, Moscow 2007, pp. 200–203.

⁶ A. Peck, *Missionary and Scholar: Russian Orthodox Archbishop Nil Isakovich's Perception of Tibetan Buddhism in Eastern Siberia*, "Sibirica" 5 (2006), pp. 62–86; D.A. Karpuk, *Arkhiyepiskop Nil (Isakovich) (1799–1874): Geolog, mineralog, paleontolog i bogoslov*, Saint-Petersburg 2015.

territory was occupied by the French troops in 1812 during the invasion of Russia by Napoleon.⁷ While it is impossible to verify this story, it is noteworthy that in his later writings Archbishop Nil used a lot of Latin quotations. As seen from his other publications Nil also knew Polish language, both spoken and written. This should not come as a surprise because Mogilev belonged to Rzeczpospolita prior to the First Partition of Poland and it had a considerable Polish population.

In 1825 he was ordained as a monk, and in 1838 he was appointed to the position of Archbishop of Irkutsk in Eastern Siberia. His diocese occupied a vast territory comprised of the whole of Eastern Siberia up to the coastal regions of the Pacific Ocean, inhabited by various tribes and peoples. In his missionary activities Nil concentrated on the propagation of Christianity among the Buryat Mongols, who were Buddhists and had religious literary traditions of their own. For this purpose, he started learning the Mongolian script and language, as well as reading Buddhist books. The outcome of his Buddhist studies was a book entitled “Buddhism, Regarded in Relation to its Adepts Living in Siberia” printed in St. Petersburg in 1858.⁸ To compile it he used several Buddhist books in the written Mongolian language as well as Russian archival materials concerning the Buddhist population of Siberia.

In his book Nil wrote that during his stay in Siberia between 1838–1853 many Buryats adopted Christianity and he himself baptized hundreds of them. Some of the reasons for such a success were, as he explained, “the translation of the books of the divine service into the Buryat Mongolian language and conducting religious services and rituals in this language. The sounds of their native language sometimes produced miraculous effect on the Buryats. For example, Zangei Khamakov, the taisha of the Tungkin Buriyats, upon hearing in St. Nicholas Church in Gujir singing in the Mongolian language he became so excited that he turned his mind towards Christianity and expressed his wish to get baptized immediately together with his family and to build a church on a place, where a pagan temple had already been under construction.”⁹

Archbishop Nil had an extraordinary assistant – a Buryat convert to Christianity named Nikolai Nilov-Dorjiev (1815–1891) whose “spiritual transfiguration” was vividly described in Nil’s “Buddhism.”¹⁰ His original name was Nagmat, and he was a lama. At the age of 21 he received a *gelong*’s ordination and then became a lama-meditator, the *diyanči*. However, his meeting with Archbishop Nil exerted such an impression on this lama that in the following year he was baptized and soon started teaching the Buryat Mongol language at the Theology School in Irkutsk. It was at that time that, together with Archbishop Nil, he started translating Christian books. In 1853 Dorjiev became a Christian priest and then moved to Yaroslavl with the Archbishop and next to St. Petersburg to continue his translation work.

⁷ Karpuk, *Arkhiyepiskop Nil (Isakovich)*, pp. 18–19.

⁸ Nil, *Buddizm, rassmatrivayemyi v otnoshenii k posledovateliam yego, obitayushchim v Sibiri*, Saint-Petersburg 1858.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 288.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 343–347; Karpuk, *Arkhiyepiskop Nil (Isakovich)*, pp. 90–92.

Archbishop Nil is said to have influenced the decision of Russian authorities to expel the British missionaries from Selenginsk in 1840.¹¹ It is very likely that the appointment of Nil by imperial order as the Archbishop of Yaroslavl in European Russia in December 1853 came about at the personal initiative of the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. The reason behind this move was the Tsar's approval in May 1853 of the legislation concerning Lamaist clergy of Eastern Siberia, which was regarded by some local Orthodox Christian clerics as being too advantageous towards Buddhists. However, the governor-general N. N. Muravyov regarded the "Lama question" settled and did not want any more problems with it.¹²

As a result, Archbishop Nil had to publish his translations of Christian books into Mongolian in the years when he resided far away from Siberia, in spite of that it was the place where the audience of these publications lived. However, during his stay in St. Petersburg (1856–1858) he established contacts with professors of the Oriental Department of St. Petersburg University.¹³ In order to properly arrange Christian religious services in Mongolian he also set up contact with the Court Singing Chapel. There exists evidence that Nil attempted to return to Siberia, while holding the rank of Archbishop in order to continue his work of converting Buddhists to Christianity.

From 1858 to 1873 at least nine Christian books were printed in Cyrillic script under the auspices of Archbishop Nil. These books were printed in St. Petersburg at the printing house of the Synod, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church during the period 1721–1918. A "church version" of Cyrillic script was used for these publications.¹⁴ These books are:

1. "The Beginnings of the Christian Teaching" (Russ.: *Начатки христианского учения*; 1858);
2. "A Service Book" (Russ. *Служебник*; 1858);
3. "Prayer Book" (Russ. *Молитвослов*; 1864);
4. "Octoechos, The Book of Eight Tones" (Russ. *Октоих*; 1866);
5. "A Missal Book for the Lord's Holidays" (Russ. *Службы во дни Господних праздников*; 1867);
6. "Lenten Triodion" (Russ. *Постная триодь*; 1868);
7. "Euchology" (Russ. *Требник*; 1870);
8. "Flowery Triodion" (Russ. *Цветная триодь*; 1871);
9. "Irmologion" (Russ. *Ирмологий*; 1871);
10. "Missal" (Russ. *Минея общая*; 1872).

¹¹ Karpuk, *Arkhiepiskop Nil (Isakovich)*, p. 74.

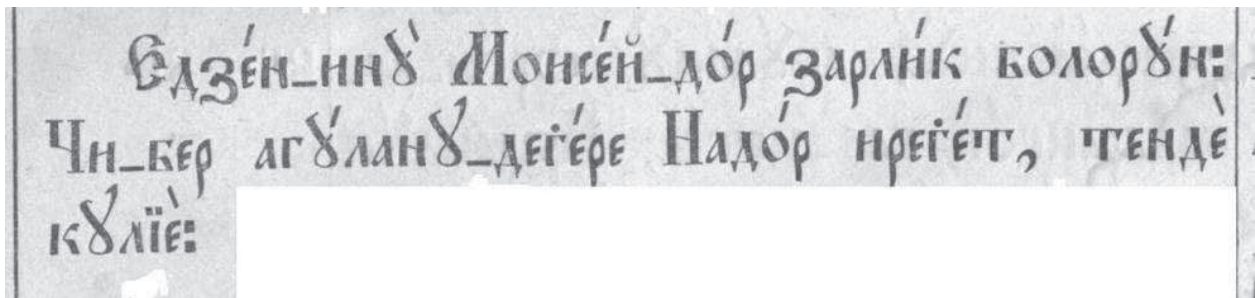
¹² Ibidem, pp. 99–100; N.B. Tsyrempilov, *Buddizm i imperiya: Buriatskaya buddiyskaya obshchina v Rossii (XVIII – nach. XX v.)*, Ulan-Ude 2013, pp. 152–168, 171.

¹³ The Oriental Department was moved from Kazan to St. Petersburg in 1855.

¹⁴ In 1703 Tsar Peter I introduced "civil writing" in Russia. However, since the church service continued to be conducted in the "Church Slavonic" language, the old way of writing which contains some defunct letters and obsolete spellings remained in the religious literature, especially liturgical.

In these books the method used for the transcription of written Mongolian words cannot be regarded as satisfactory. The writing system, which was based on the ancient Uighur script, had been in use among the Mongols since the early thirteenth century. The contemporary difference between the spelling and the spoken language is great and in this aspect it can be compared to English or French. In the words of a famous Russian Mongolist, A.M. Pozdneev, “in regard of their spelling and [spoken] language the Buryats are absolutely like the French”.¹⁵ However, Nil and his assistants transcribed every letter of Mongolian written language with corresponding Cyrillic letters. It should be noticed that, despite some cases, there exists no big difference between Russian spelling and pronunciation. For this reason the Mongolian text written with Russian letters did not in any way became closer to the spoken language or even understandable.

The following example taken from the “Missal” (p. 4) is a quotation from the Old Testament, different from the British Bible Society translation of 1834:



Transliteration:

Edzen-inu Moisei-dor zarlik bolorun: či-ber ayulanu-degere Nador ireget, tende kulie:

It should be read as adequate for Classical Mongolian text:

Ejen inu Moisei-dur jarliy bolorun: či ber ayulan-u deger-e Nadur ireged tende küliy-e.

The London Missionary Society translation into Mongolian is as follows:

Teyin böged Yaquva anu Mosi-dur jarliy bolorun: či ber ayulan-u deger-e nadur ireged tende küliyen üiled.

English translation:

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there” (Exodus XXIV:12).

I have chosen this small passage in particular since it contains the word *ayula* “a mountain.” A famous Buryat Buddhist cleric, Agvang Dorjiev, attempted to improve the Mongolian spelling and chose this word to demonstrate an example of inconsistency between Mongolian writing and pronunciation. He said, “The spelling *ayula* is not

¹⁵ I.V. Kulganek, *Neizvestnaya rabota A.M. Pozdneeva o perevode Sviashchennogo Pisaniya*, “Istoricheskii vestnik” 7(2000), pp. 43–70.

pronounced [as such] by a Mongol of any place” (*ayula kemen bičideg egüni qamiγ-a yaĵar-un mongyol ülü ügülemüi*).¹⁶

In the preface to the translation of the “Missal” printed in 1872, Nil put forward some basic transcription principles used in the book (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). Though these principles lack the precise linguistic approach, here is their abridged rendering.

1. Letter *a* when put after the name in order to mark vocative case is pronounced as a long vowel without merging with preceding consonant.

2. Letter *ε* (“e”) should be pronounced as the letter *э* (“e”) of modern Russian alphabet. It means that it cannot mark iotacization of the vowel in the beginning of the word nor it can mark palatalization of the preceding consonant.

3. Spellings *εp* (“er”) and *εH* (“en”) should not merge with the preceding syllable and are not subject to iotacization. Two examples given by Nil are Mongolian words *küčün-iyer* (‘by power of’) and *Eĵen-iyen* (‘Oh Lord!’). Thus he meant the affixes of instrumental case and of possessive case.

4. Letter *z* often corresponds with Latin “g” and is marked in such cases as *ř*. This phrase is not quite clear. However, Nil gave as an example the word *gegen* (‘bright’) which could mean that this letter marks a non-palatalized consonant.

5. Letter *κ* (“k”) is pronounced by all the Burayts with aspiration as “κx” (“kh”).

6. Combination of letters *∂з* (“dz”) should be pronounced as one sound in the same way as the combination “dz” is pronounced in the Polish words, for example as ‘narodzony’.

7. Combination of letters *∂ж* (“dĵ”) should be pronounced in a palatalized way so that the initial sound “d” is hardly recognizable.

The points 6 and 7 look a bit strange and they reflect rather the phonetic standards of the Khalkha Mongolian. According to G.D. Sanzheev, *ж* (“ĵ”) and *з* (“z”) of the Buryat Mongolian “acoustically almost absolutely coincide with Russian *ж* and *з*.”¹⁷ Thus the question which Buryat dialect (if any) served as a foundation of Nil’s transcription system remains open.

The church services in the Mongolian language were conducted rarely and received no big response from the faithful.¹⁸ It seems that Archbishop Nil soon understood the fault of transliteration. For example, a “Prayer Book” which was printed in Cyrillic letters in 1864, was published anew in 1868 in traditional Mongolian vertical script (see fig. 4 and fig. 5). Archbishop Nil’s attempt to use Cyrillic letters following the Mongolian orthography did not prove a successful one.

¹⁶ Vagindra, *Sine qaučün üsüg-üd-ün ilyal terigüten-i bičigsen debter orosibai*, Naran, Saint-Petersburg s.a., p. 5.

¹⁷ S.D. Sanzheev, *Grammatika buriat-mongol’skogo yazyka*. Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moskva & Leningrad, 1941, p. 19.

¹⁸ Karpuk, *Arkhiyepiskop Nil (Isakovich)*, p. 92.

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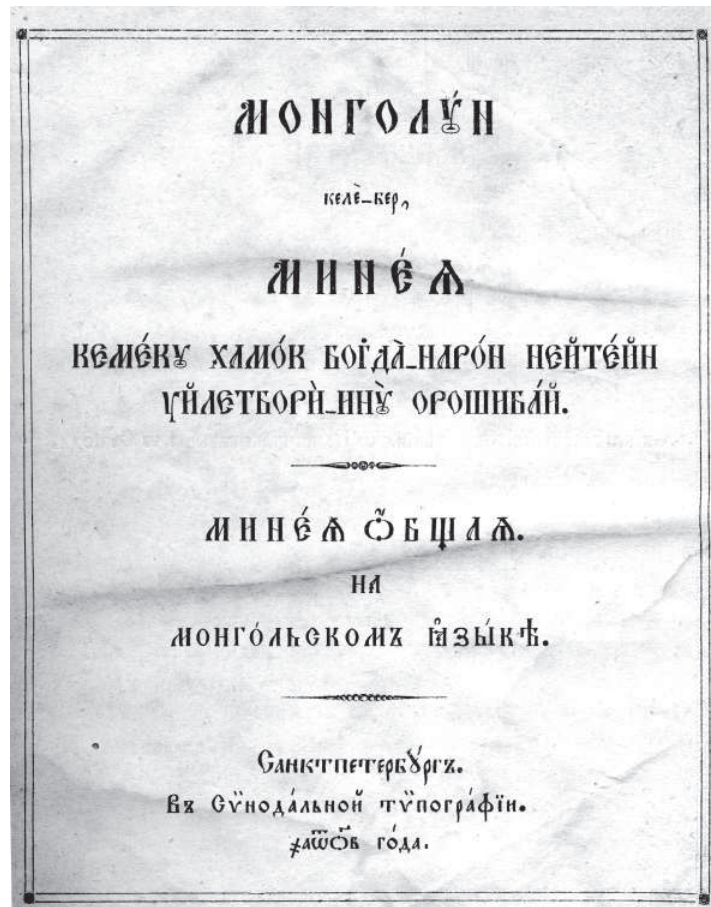


Fig. 1. A "Missal" (Russ. *Минея общая*). Saint Petersburg, 1872.

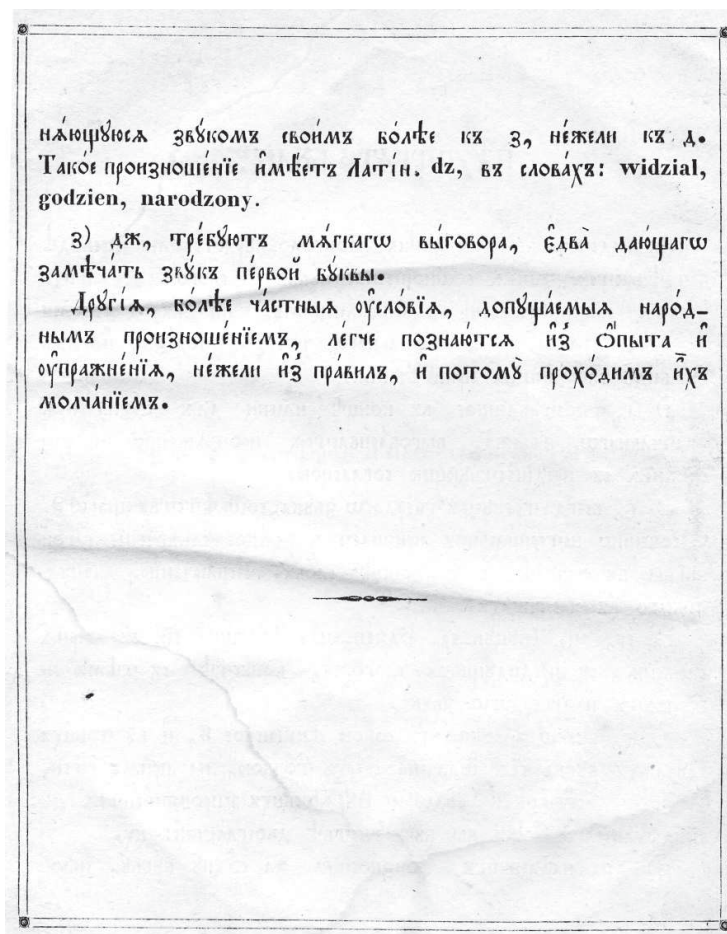
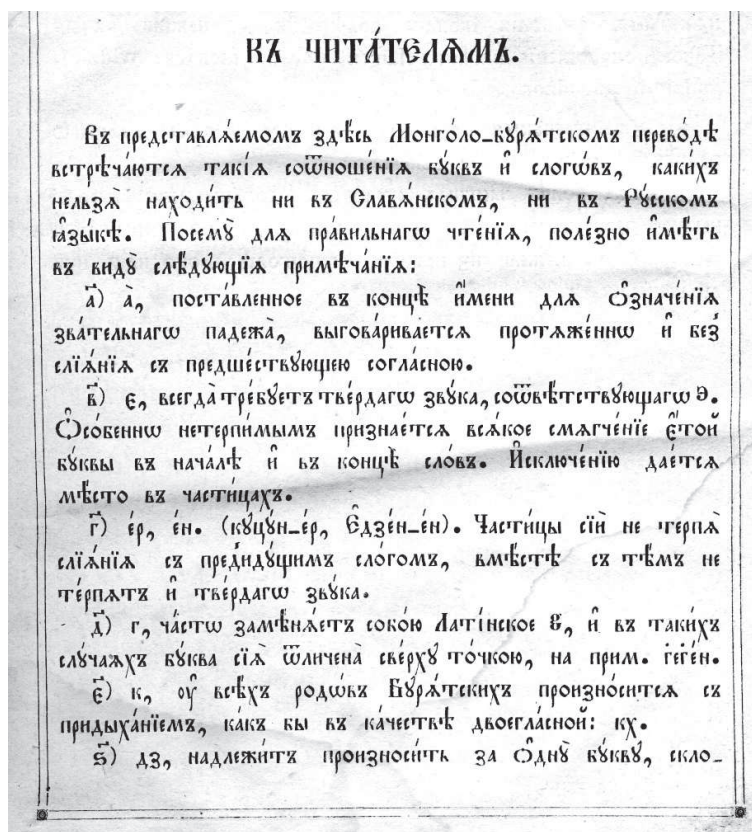


Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. Introduction to the Mongolian Translation of the "Missal".

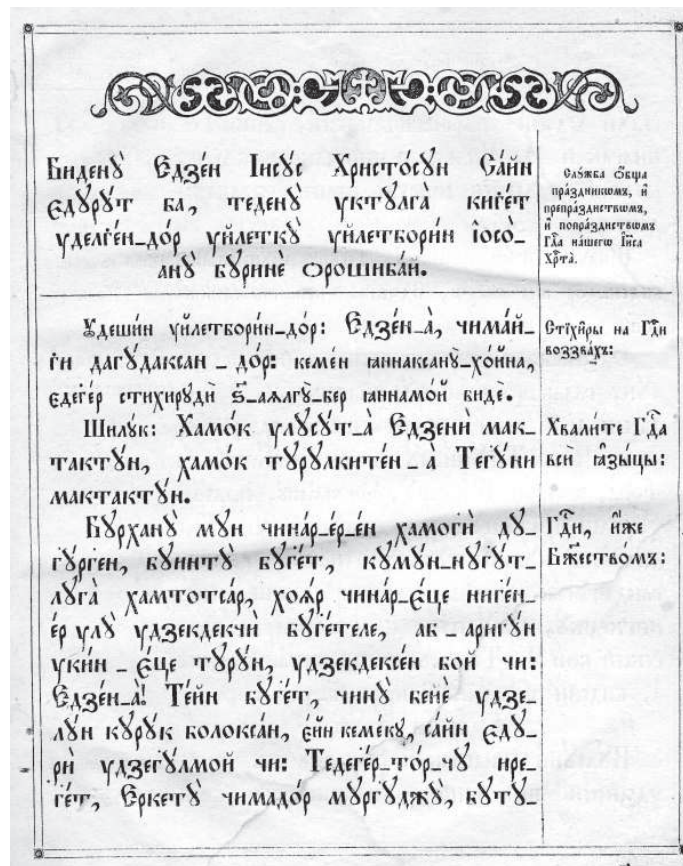


Fig. 4. The first page of the "Missal" in Mongolian.

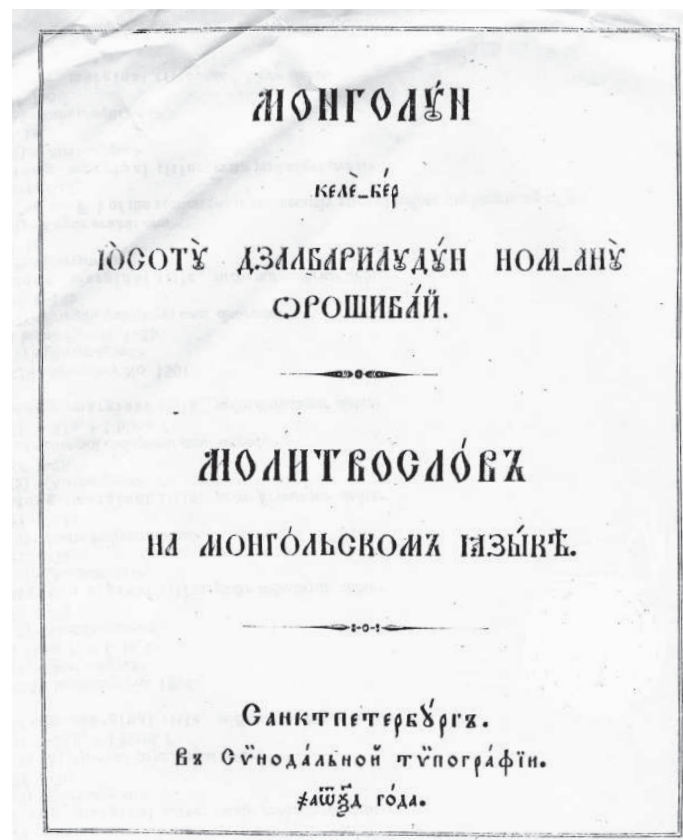


Fig. 5. Prayer Book (Russ. Молитвослов). Saint Petersburg, 1864. Printed in Cyrillic letters.

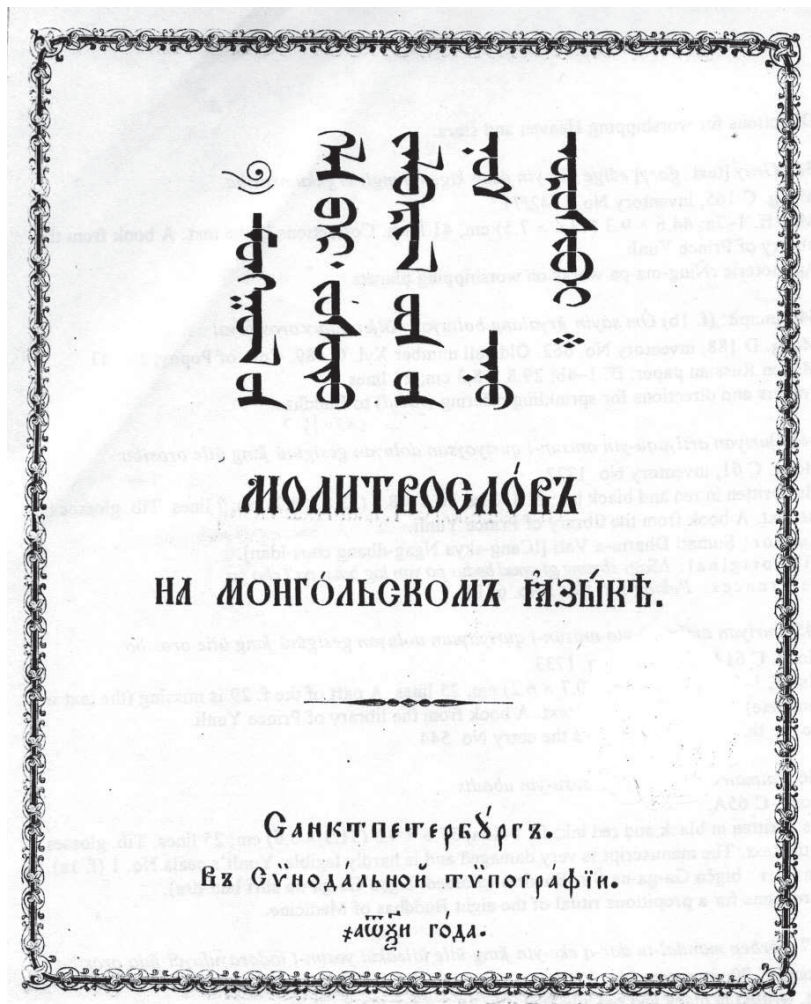


Fig. 6. Prayer Book (Russ. *Молитвослов*). Saint Petersburg, 1868. Printed in Mongolian letters.