



A NEW CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE VILNIUS HAND-PRESS PRINTING

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БОНДАР, НАТАЛІЯ ПЕТРІВНА. *ВЛЪНІУСЬКІ ЄВАНГЕЛІЯ 1575–1644 РР.
З ФОНДІВ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЇ БІБЛІОТЕКИ УКРАЇНИ ІМЕНІ В.І. ВЕРНАДСЬКОГО:
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In 2021, the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine published a comprehensive study dedicated to one of the most prominent liturgical works of the early Vilnius Cyrillic book printing – the Church Slavonic Gospel.¹ The very first Vilnius Church Slavonic Gospel, printed in 1575 by Piotr Mstislavets, became the prototype for subsequent editions of the liturgical Gospel in Vilnius, Lviv, Kyiv, and Moscow.

The author of the new publication is Natalija Bondar, a Candidate of Historical Sciences renowned for her expertise as a bibliographer and book historian. Dr. Bondar, as a long-standing fellow of the National Library of Ukraine, has contributed significantly to the field with numerous scholarly papers delving into the history of early modern book culture in Ukraine and Europe. This

1 The actual date of release is 2022. According to the colophon, the publication was signed for printing on November 17, 2022.

newest work by Dr. Bondar continues her series of catalogs detailing copies of the Cyrillic books stored in the National Library of Ukraine. The series was initiated in 2012 with a catalog of books printed by Ivan Fiodorov and Piotr Mstislavets.²

Bondar's decision to compile a catalog of Vilnius Cyrillic Gospels, printed from 1575 to 1644, originated from an encounter with a unique copy. This copy comprises fragments from three different editions and a few sheets from an unidentified printing house (p. 5).³ The core of the catalog constitutes bibliographical descriptions of four editions, and their 31 copies:

1. The Gospel of 1575, printed by Piotr Mstislavets, and its 10 copies,
2. The Gospel of 1600, printed by the Mamoniches, and its 8 copies,
3. The Gospel of 1610s–1620s, printed by the Mamoniches, and its 7 copies,
4. The Gospel of 1644, printed by the Vilnius Orthodox Brotherhood, and its 6 copies.

The multitude of copies for each Vilnius Gospel edition in the National Library of Ukraine greatly enriches bibliographical research. The fifth entry of the catalog stands out by describing an assembled copy of the Gospel from the 1630s, featuring sheets from an unknown printer, rather than detailing an edition.

N. Bondar is among the scholars who acknowledge the significance of descriptive bibliography for the historical science and humanities. Her scholarly position shapes the characteristics of the new catalog, which consists of three equal parts – monographic research, bibliographical descriptions of each edition and its copies, and thorough scientific supplements with indexes. Because the catalog includes a monographic research, the author gives it a composite genre definition – “the comprehensive monograph-catalog of synthetic multi-informative purpose” (p. 5).



2 Bondar, Natalija Petrivna. *Vidannia Ivana Fedorova ta Petra Mstislavca z fondiv Nacional'noi biblioteki Ukraini imeni V.I. Vernads'kogo: doslidzhennia, poprimirnikovij opis*. Kiiiv, 2012.

3 Here and further, the pages of the reviewed monograph are indicated in brackets.

In the first part of the “monograph-catalog,” divided into eight chapters, the author presents the results of a comprehensive historical-bibliographical study of the Vilnius Cyrillic Gospels (p. 5–132). The study begins with a chapter that delves into the tradition of researching the Vilnius Gospels, primarily in Ukraine. It also examines the methodology used in the study and discusses the principles of bibliographical description. The author addresses unresolved issues within contemporary book studies, evaluates the innovations proposed by some peers, and responds to criticism of others. She assesses whether using a bibliographic fingerprint is appropriate for describing the Cyrillic book (p. 14). The author also finds it important to address the remark of Andrej Voznesensky, a Cyrillic book printing researcher from St. Petersburg, regarding the excessive inclusion of incipits from each page of the book in a bibliographical description (p. 11). The Ukrainian researcher, who constantly faces the problem of deterioration of old liturgical books and their attribution, underscores the significance of incipits (the beginning of the first line of a book page) and proposes the inclusion of explicits (the beginning of the last line) in descriptions (p. 12–14).

In the subsequent five chapters of the study, the author conducts a thorough analysis of various aspects of the Gospels. This includes historical insights into the operations of printing houses such as those of P. Mstislavets, the Mamoniches, and the Vilnius Orthodox Brotherhood during the period of Gospel printing. Additionally, the study examines alterations to the typeset and composition of the Gospels, as well as the regularity and features of watermarks and ornamentation. Through comprehensive analysis, the author uncovers previously unknown details about methods of presswork of Vilnius printing houses. The significance of these discoveries for the history of the hand-press printing cannot be overstated. Furthermore, microhistories detailing the 17th century owners of the Vilnius Gospels provide valuable insights into dissemination of books.

The second part of the monograph-catalog contains bibliographical descriptions of editions and copies of the Gospels (p. 135–307). When compiling the bibliographical description, N. Bondar follows the principle of maximalism. This approach is justified by the belief that detailed description “enriches and enhances the information provided in other studies of a historical, book-related and bibliographical nature” (p. 10). The bibliographical description of the edition consists of 15 elements in the following sequence: basic information on the book (uniform title, printing house, date of publication), transcript of the imprint (the first three Vilnius editions of the Gospel were issued without title pages, and their imprint data were printed in an extensive colophon), contents, structure of the book (collation statement, format, foliation, gatherings, catchwords, and running-titles), typography (number of lines, font size, lines

width, color of printing ink), features of typesetting and presswork (the ways to mark up parts of the text), decorative design (illustrations, ornaments), errors in foliation, typesetting variants, paper variants (based on watermarks), initial letters of the first and last line of each leaf (this element of the description is included in appendices due to its extensiveness), bibliographic fingerprint, watermarks of edition, known copies, and references. Some elements of the description (watermarks, illustrations, ornaments) correspond to appendices. The description of the publication ends with a block of illustrations, depicting sheets with typeset variants and other printing features.

After describing each edition, N. Bondar proceeds with detailed description of the copies, split into 17 elements: basic information on the book (uniform title, printing house, date of publication), copy number (including shelfmark and inventory number), storage location, collation statement (actual number of sheets), completeness/defectiveness, copy condition, variant of the edition, ink smudges, size of the text block, provenance, other features of the copy, binding, watermarks, remarks (information about the identification of the copy, in some descriptions this element is omitted), and origin. Illustrations of copies are put together at the end of the entire section.

The structure and methodology of the bibliographical description of Gospel editions and copies used by N. Bondar surpasses the practical purpose of guidance for the identification of copies and provides scientific data on history of book publication and dissemination. On the other hand, with such a multitude of description elements, their logical sequence sometimes lacks coherence. For example, it is unclear why the leaf numbering mistakes, closely related to foliation, appear in the description of the edition just after the decorative design. Additionally, it could be rather confusing why elements describing the paper, such as paper variants (the 10th element) and the watermarks of the edition (the 13th element), are separated.

The concluding part of the monograph-catalog encompasses a variety of addendum: three appendices (Identifiers of the first and last lines of each leaf of the Gospels; A scheme of the migration of the copies; Tables of watermarks), an album of illustrations, an album of watermarks, and more than ten thematic indexes and reference lists (p. 311–478). Thus, the reader is provided with the opportunity to approach the history of the Gospel printing in Vilnius from different angles.

While processing a large amount of data, the author inevitably included some inaccuracies. For example, in the description of the Gospel of 1575, the variants of the typeset on leaves 9 verso and 16 verso of the second series are

omitted (p. 137–139). The figures with illustrations included in the catalog (p. 157–162) help to address the missing information:

leaf 9 verso	
1 variant (fig. 17)	2 variant (fig. 18)
lines 15–16: «ГАЛИЛЕА Я/СЫК,»	lines 15–16: «ГАЛИЛЕА / ЯСЫК,»
line 16, the end: «... ВЪТМЪ,»	line 16, the end: «... ВЪТМЪ,»
leaf 16 verso	
1 variant (fig. 21)	2 variant (fig. 22)
lower running-title: «... речегъ ...»	lower running-title: «... ре ^ѣ гъ ...»

The printer reduced the word „речегъ“ to „ре^ѣгъ“ on the leaf 16 verso to align the side edge of the text. This same correction was also applied to the upper running-title on the leaf 20 recto (see fig. 23 and 24).

Despite the in-depth research and extensive bibliographical description, N. Bondar states that there are still some unexplained issues concerning the history of the Vilnius Gospels. Some of these issues can be resolved through new research (for example, the author suggests comparing the text of the Gospels of the Vilnius and Ostrog printing houses (p. 29), or specifying the date when the Gospel of the 1610s–1620s was printed by studying owners’ records (p. 27)), while others may never find an answer to (e.g., the authorship of the illustrations and ornaments in the Vilnius Gospels). The scarcity of sources and the diverse interpretations in historiography lead the researcher to lean toward one opinion or another. For instance, N. Bondar initially concurs with the view that P. Mstislavets may not have been the engraver responsible for the portraits of evangelists (p. 113). However, she later accepts the possibility that the printer himself could have created and carved the woodblocks for the illustrations (p. 121).

In conclusion, it is evident that N. Bondar’s monograph-catalog brings a significant contribution to the field of book history. While the study focuses on a specific type of a liturgical book, its findings hold relevance for a broader spectrum of historical topics. These include the traditions surrounding the printing of the Gospel in Cyrillic script, the operations of urban printing houses during the early modern period, and the unique characteristics of Vilnius hand-press printing, among others. It is anticipated that this new work will attract readership in Lithuania and beyond, serving as an essential resource for future historical inquiries into book history.