The return of the majority of the Kalmyk population to their homeland in Jungaria in 1771 surprised contemporary Russian authorities and have also puzzled generations of historians. For more than 150 years, the Kalmyks, who were considered subjects of the tsar, had enjoyed autonomy over their lands and domestic issues. In exchange for their voluntary military service, the Russian authorities exempted the Kalmyks from yasak and rewarded them for their service with generous gifts, salaries, ranks, and titles. In addition, the authorities granted the Kalmyks free trading rights. During their stay in Russia, the Kalmyks had developed independent state-like structures along with a distinct political and cultural identity. Subsequently, they came to identify themselves as “Kalmyks”—as opposed to their Oirat brethren, who had stayed behind in Jungaria and adopted the name of “Jungars”. In my talk I attempt at providing fresh insights into the Kalmyk decision to leave Russia. I show that the decision ensued from a distinct nature of the Kalmyk/Russian relationship, which, in turn, was profoundly shaped by the dynamics of Russia’s Inner Asian frontiers.

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