Kalmyk khan Donduk-Ombo died in 1741. As happened previously in the history of the Kalmyk people, who in the 1630s arrived in the Caspian steppes from their native Dzungaria, the death of the ruler unleashed a new cycle of violence, bitter disputes and internal wars among them. As usual, hostilities spilled over against the Russians as well. To pacify the Kalmyks, and to name a new Kalmyk viceroy, the government dispatched Vasilii Tatishchev. A capable administrator and also, incidentally the first Russian historian, Tatishchev was at the time under investigation on charges of bribery and corruption as the head of the Orenburg region. The government transferred Tatishchev to Astrakhan' and conditioned dismissal of the charges against him on the success of his mission. The arrival of Vasilii Tatishchev in Astrakhan' in 1741 marked an important juncture in the history of the area.

The Rule of Donduk-Dashi, 1741-61

Donduk-Ombo's death on March 21, 1741, almost immediately resulted in a renewed internal war between several Kalmyk factions. Donduk-Ombo's widow, Jan, wanted to see her son, Randul, become the khan. She was opposed by a group led by Darma-Bala, Dorji-Nazar and others, who wanted to install the late Ayuki khan's son, Galdan-Danjin. Jan launched a war against the opposition, accusing it of disrespect towards the khan's widow because of her Kabardinian origin and Muslim religion. Jan's people eventually killed the opposition's pretender, Galdan-Danjin, and rumors spread that Jan was also determined to get rid of Darma-Bala and Donduk-Dashi.2

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1. For the previous history of the Kalmyks, see Michael Khodarkovsky, "Where Two Worlds Meet: the Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" (unpub. Ph. D. diss., The University of Chicago, 1987).
The Russian government was no less resolute in its intentions. This time it was determined to place in office its own candidate. The government's choice fell on Ayuki khan's grandson, Chakdorjab's son, Donduk-Dashi, a powerful Kalmyk tayishi (a rank of the Kalmyk nobility) who had long been loyal to Russian interests. In 1739, his disagreements with Donduk-Oombo had compelled him to request Russian permission to settle together with Princess Taishina, who resided in Stavropol' (today Tol'iatti) on the Volga in a settlement especially constructed for the Kalmyk converts. For security reasons, the government chose to settle him in the Krasnoiarsk fortress situated on the Kama defense line. There he and his zayisangs (a rank of the Kalmyk gentry) were given cash and grain salaries, as well as additional allowances for the purchase of hay, candles, and fire-wood.  

Tatischev was instructed to invite eleven major tayishis to meet at a specified location and to declare Donduk-Dashi the Kalmyk viceroy in their presence. Tatischev then was to administer the oath of the tayishis to the new viceroy, and to distribute annual payments among those present. If the Kalmyks of Jan's group refused to take an oath, Tatischev was allowed to convince them by the use of force, but without bringing destruction to their uluses (in the eighteenth century an ulus was an appanage of the Kalmyk noble, and it consisted of people and herds).  

The government was correct in predicting Jan's continued opposition to the new viceroy. Bodong tayishi with a few other tayishis and zayisangs who supported Jan's party raided their opponents' uluses. Tatischev reported that they took many captives and sold them to the Kuban. He added that if this were allowed to continue, in time there would be no Kalmyks left. However, Tatischev did not have sufficient forces to stop Jan and her allies, and the commander of the Russian troops in the area, General Tarakanov refused to cooperate with Tatischev by sending troops without an order from St. Petersburg.  

In this situation, Tatischev decided to explore peaceful means once again. He met with Jan in person, but these discussions produced no results. She agreed to accept the appointment of a new Kalmyk viceroy only if Donduk-Dashi married her, thus enabling Jan to maintain her power and respectable status. Tatischev, on the other hand, had government orders to the opposite, i.e., to prevent Donduk-Dashi's marriage to Jan, and thus to avoid an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the Kalmyk viceroy.