

Some of Kouzminov's claims are reiterations of stories that have been told before and have yet to be substantiated. For example, he alleges that the Soviets used *B. anthracis* and *F. tularensis* against German troops in the Second World War — an often-repeated story that has not been verified but has been discounted by microbiologists on the basis of epidemiological analyses. Kouzminov also asserts that Soviet agents obtained marburgvirus samples by exhuming victims of the first recorded outbreak of marburgvirus disease in Germany in 1967. But documentation of the official exchange of marburgvirus strains between German and Soviet microbiology institutes is publicly available.

Other claims, especially those in the final chapter, seem bizarre. If Kouzminov is to be believed, almost every outbreak of a new or

emerging infectious disease in the past 15 years — including the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain in 2001 and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003 — may have been either a deliberate bioweapons attack or an accidental release of a genetically engineered microbe from a bioweapons facility. He also implies that the causative agents of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome were genetically engineered specifically to attack Native Americans. That allegations such as these would be made by a professional scientist in the face of a huge body of literature that seems to contradict them is astonishing.

It seems surprising that an insider can write a book about the special operations of Soviet foreign intelligence services in the West and provide so little about their achievements. At

best, *Biological Espionage* is the personal memoir of a former Soviet employee who writes about the practices of Soviet and Russian intelligence agencies in the biological field but provides little evidence of their accomplishments. Why was it written in the first place? If not to inform, then perhaps to misinform? ■

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Surface tensions

A reinterpretation, using damaged photographs, of a failed attempt to fly to the North Pole.

Colin Martin

Danish artist Joachim Koester recalls an ill-fated attempt to reach the North Pole by hydrogen balloon in his film installation at the 2005 Venice Biennale, *Message from Andrée*. It was inspired by the story of Swedish engineer Salomon August Andrée, whose balloon, optimistically named *The Eagle*, crash-landed in July 1897 a few hundred kilometres north of the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen, three days after taking off from Danes Island.

Andrée and his companions — another engineer, Knut Frænkel, and a physicist, Nils Strindberg — trekked across pack ice for three months, but failed to reach Franz Josef Land before the onset of winter. They died on White Island in mid-October. Their bodies and equipment were not found until August 1930, when an account of their misadventure, based on Andrée's diaries and Strindberg's notebooks, was published as *With the Eagle to the Pole*.

Strindberg had taken more than 100 pictures, using photographic plates with an expiry date of 1 January 1898. Remarkably, the exposed plates survived for 33 years and photographs were printed from them. Some, showing the aeronauts beside their damaged balloon and scenes from their trek, were re-touched to remove surface marks and were reproduced in the best-selling book.

Historians studying the photographs in the Andrée museum at Gränna also ignored this superficial layer of 'visual noise'. But Koester has used it to reinterpret the archive, by re-photographing many images with a 16-mm camera and producing a short



sequence of animated film. "If language defines our world, the black dots and light streaks on the photographs can be seen as bordering on the visible...pointing to the twilight world of what can be told and what cannot be told," he explains.

The jerky, random movements of the surface marks do not provide a definitive narrative, but Koester's film hints at the men's subconscious uncertainty, contrasting their innermost thoughts with the stoic 'public' thoughts conscientiously recorded in their journals.

In a catalogue essay on Koester's artistic response to the tragedy, Anders Kreuger characterizes nineteenth-century polar exploration as "a theatre of vanity and



GRÄNNA MUSEUM

Joachim Koester uses surface damage to photographic plates (left) to tell the tale of Salomon August Andrée's failed balloon flight to the North Pole.

delusion", inspired as much by Jules Verne's imagination as any defined scientific purpose. In retrospect, the notion of inexperienced aeronauts taking off into the Arctic wilderness in a hard to manoeuvre balloon, dependent on a strong southerly wind for their progress, seems foolhardy at best.

During their arduous trek across the pack ice, Strindberg coped psychologically by making endless lists: of the meals they ate, the equipment they carried, and, most poignantly, their ideas for improving future expeditions. In contrast, the incoherent short phrases and single words of Andrée's last diary entries have an abstract quality matched by Koester's film. The film, which can be seen in the Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale until 6 November, shifts the focus of Strindberg's images from the intentional to the accidental, reconfiguring a photographic narrative into a powerful affirmation of human endeavour in adversity. Colin Martin is a London-based writer.