

## Books

# WWI's horrors examined through the lens of its final hours

**11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour**  
By Joseph E. Persico  
Random House, 456 pp., \$29.95

By Michael Giltz  
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The sanest day of World War I was probably Dec. 25, 1914. Fighters on both sides agreed to a cease-fire, met in no-man's land and shook hands. Carols were sung in the trenches.

For those still alive some four years later, surely the craziest day was Nov.

11, 1918. The armistice had been agreed upon early in the morning. But despite pleas from the beaten Germans to stop the fighting, Allied leaders would make it official only at the neat, round time of 11/11 on the 11th hour in the morning.

Until then, everyone was urged to keep on fighting. The result? More men were killed and wounded on the final day — most of them after the armistice had been signed — than on D-Day in World War II.

Joseph Persico, author of the acclaimed *Roosevelt's Secret War*, uses

that day as the touchstone for *11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour; Armistice Day, 1918: World War I and Its Violent Climax*, an engrossing account of "the war to end all wars." But he doesn't focus on that final day until the last quarter of the book.

First, Persico introduces us to some of the war's participants and tells us what they were doing during the fateful hours leading up to 11 a.m. on Nov. 11. Many of the fighters must have looked back at what they had been through. Persico, too, looks back at key events in their war-

time experience. He illuminates key battles in which the men fought, and he recounts their first days in the trenches as well as other telling moments. One grim question hovers over all these scenes: Had the men survived years of hell only to die in the war's last minutes?

With admirable skill, Persico weaves in every facet of World War I: how it began, life in the trenches and the plague of rats. He includes the poetry and the rah-rah patriotism on the home front, which contrasted with the cynical attitude in the

trenches. He avoids romantic notions of war. But heroes do emerge — famous ones such as George Patton and Alvin York; lesser-known figures such as Pvt. Joseph Oklahombi, a Choctaw Indian; and, above all, the regular Tommies and doughboys who fought and died and sometimes endured.

It may seem ironic that so many died after the armistice was signed. But Persico explains why the final, bloody day of World War I was not ironic or tragic — not when you know the horrors that preceded it.

