Terrible famines struck Turin in 1627-28 (this one rendered even more fearsome by the plague of 1629-30), in 1649, in 1677-79, and again in 1693-95; others, less grave, recurred in between. In each of these crises the authorities responded by trying to herd the beggars into improvised poorhouses, and by distributing bread from door to door to the needy. All these efforts however failed to evolve into a permanent structure of poor relief, until the government undertook a full-scale reform in 1717. From that date Turin's paupers were forbidden to beg in the streets and were ordered to be confined in the new poorhouse, where they were made to work and attend religious services. (In practice however these regulations were unenforceable: charitable citizens went on handing coins to beggars, and the beggars did their best to avoid being locked up). Even this ambitious reform failed to produce a system of poor-relief that could respond effectively to a major crisis. When another bad famine struck Turin in 1733, the same dismal sequence of events unfolded: an influx of desperate country people came to the city in search of charity, joining the hordes of beggars who roamed the streets, and filled the new city poorhouse far beyond its capacity.

One economic development in this time of hunger and hardship, however, which would have important implications for the future, was the emergence of a new industry at Turin: mechanized silk-spinning. In 1663 the city council gave permission to two entrepreneurs, Giovanni Francesco Galleani and Girolamo Pinardi, to build a water-powered spinning mill on one of the canals diverted from the river Dora, north of the city. Pinardi came from Bologna, where the complex technology for mechanical silk-spinning had originated. Until this time silk was spun by hand, mostly by female labor: Galleani and Pinardi's mill marked a decisive innovation, with the potential not only to increase the quantity of spun silk produced, but also to improve its quality, for machine-spun thread was finer, stronger, and more regular than the hand-spun variety. Following their example, other local entrepreneurs set up spinning mills in the industrial suburb north of the city. Other cities in Piedmont adopted the new technology, notably Racconigi, which quickly became the main center of silk production for the entire region. By the early eighteenth century Piedmont was exporting a growing volume of high-grade silk thread, or "organzine" as it was called, to the weavers of luxury textiles in Lyon, Holland, London, and other parts of Europe. Meanwhile local technicians were perfecting the machinery itself; by the middle of the eighteenth century Piedmontese silk-spinning mills were reputed to be the best in Europe.