

difficulties arrived with the agricultural depression of the 1880s. Already in 1875 the competition of cheaper grains from the North American plains, the Argentine pampas, and the Russian steppes began to drive down agricultural prices on the markets of central Europe. By 1880, the full impact of the foreign competition, overproduction, and collapsing prices hit the Italian peninsula. The ensuing agrarian crisis had a pronounced impact on Piedmont's agriculture, since rice, the region's most important commercial crop, was especially hard-hit by foreign competition from Asian growers. The resulting drop in farm incomes and property values hurt not only growers, but also the urban elite who had made substantial capital investments in agriculture after 1865. At the same time, the crisis forced many small lease holders and day laborers to abandon the countryside and head to the city in search of work. Here they swelled the ranks of the unemployed and provoked mounting fears about public order. Difficulties in agriculture affected the urban economy in other ways by reducing commercial and industrial activity in Turin. The expansion of rice production in the previous decade, for instance, had involved the chemical and food processing industries along with insurance companies and banks located in the city. It was not by chance then that a new national agricultural interest-group association, the *Lega agraria*, or Agrarian League was founded in Turin in 1885 to lobby the government for protective tariffs on wheat, rice, and other key commercial crops of the Po Valley. In collaboration with influential industrial interests, the Agrarian League achieved its primary objective two years later. The new agricultural tariffs imposed in 1887 raised substantially import duties on wheat, rice, sugar beets, and hemp, the principal products of northern commercial farms.

The sharp hike in agricultural tariffs, however, had only a limited impact on the recession in the countryside. More importantly, the government's adoption of protectionism helped to spark a commercial war in 1888 with France, Italy's principal trading partner, which further damaged Piedmontese agriculture and Turin's struggling economy. After efforts to work out a satisfactory agreement with Paris failed to make headway, Italian authorities denounced the existing trade treaty of 1881. The French retaliated by applying their highest rates to all Italian exports and "differential rates", higher than those paid by anyone else, to certain Italian specialties. While the country as a whole suffered from the loss of a market that had absorbed two-fifths of nation's exports, the damage was magnified in Turin, the principal transit center for Italian products bound for France and England. As one observer later recalled, "the French rejected all at once our silk, our wines, our oils;