

INTERNATIONAL PENAL REFORM AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS: VESPASIAN V. PELLA AND THE MAKING OF A TRANSNATIONAL PENITENTIARY REFORM (1932-1939)

Tudor MUREȘAN

PhD Candidate at the `History, Civilization, Culture` Doctoral School, `Babeș-Bolyai University`, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Email: tudor.muressan@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines how the League of Nations, between 1932 and 1939, developed a coordinated international framework for penal and penitentiary reform through the work of semi-official organisations such as the International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law (IBUCL), the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC), and the International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC). Using primary archival sources, the study reconstructs the emergence of a transnational penal governance system anchored in shared standards - most notably the “Minimum Rules” for the treatment of prisoners - and identifies Vespasian V. Pella’s central role in linking legal codification, police cooperation, and prison reform. The findings show that these initiatives translated soft international norms into national legislation, exemplified by the Romanian Penal Code of 1937. The paper concludes that the League’s penal order laid the institutional groundwork for later human rights and criminal justice frameworks.

Keywords

League of Nations; penal reform; penitentiary standards; international criminal law; Vespasian V. Pella; prison governance; interwar diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

In the interwar years, the League of Nations acquired a reputation for political fragility, yet beneath high diplomacy, a dense technical order took shape. This article reconstructs how penal governance became one of the League’s most effective domains between 1932 and 1939, when a cluster of semi-official organisations - the International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law (IBUCL), the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC), and the International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC) - were drawn into a coordinated architecture. At the centre stood, amongst others, the Romanian jurist and diplomat Vespasian V. Pella, who as rapporteur of the League of Nations’ Assembly’s Fifth Committee convened the decisive 1932 Geneva meeting of seven technical bodies, secured Assembly recognition in 1933, and then leveraged that platform to generate standards, draft conventions, and national reforms.

Using almost only primary archival sources, the article advances three claims. First, the 1932–1933 turn transformed a loose ecology of expert associations into a hub-and-spoke system anchored at the Fifth

Committee, with the IBUCL as technical coordinator. Second, this system produced respected norms: the IPPC's *Ensemble de règles* ("Minimum Rules") adopted as a reference point by the Assembly (1934) and monitored through annual reports; police cooperation protocols shaped at the 1931 Conference of Central Police Offices; and model legal texts on extradition, trafficking, and terrorism. Third, these norms migrated into statute, most strikingly the Romanian Penal Code of 1937, which incorporated international model provisions (on trafficking, universal jurisdiction, and propaganda for aggressive war).

The contribution is twofold. Empirically, it integrates disparate streams - prisons, policing, and legal codification - into a single analytic narrative centred on institutional coordination. Conceptually, it reframes interwar internationalism as infrastructural rather than merely idealistic: small-state actors such as Pella could convert committee work into standards and then into national law. The argument proceeds chronologically: 1932 Geneva meeting and the IBUCL's reorganization; the genesis and uptake of the IPPC's Minimum Rules; the operational side through the ICPC and the organization of Central Police Offices norm diffusion into the Romanian Code; gender through the 1938 study of women's legal status and anti-procurement initiatives; the 1935 Berlin Congress as a case study of judicial oversight in sentence execution. The conclusion reflects on what this penal order reveals about the League's capacity for durable governance.

Throughout, the analysis relies on Assembly minutes, committee reports, and organisational correspondence, foregrounding Romania's role as *de facto* host of the IBUCL and Pella's dual positioning within both League and expert bodies.

Vespasian V. Pella's interwar activism drew on an earlier intellectual foundation laid in his 1919 book *Delicte îngăduite* (Tolerated Offences). There, he argued that criminal law must evolve with changing social harms and that legality should be guided by a higher "elementary morality." The work combined comparative legal analysis with proposals for institutional reform, such as annual reports on legislative gaps—a method that prefigured his later use of reporting and model standards within the League of Nations. Although some of his positions now appear illiberal, notably regarding sexuality, the book's analytical method—identifying unregulated harms, surveying comparative law, and advocating codification—became the template for his interwar approach to international penal governance. What Pella attempted domestically in 1919—closing normative and institutional lacunae—he later scaled up at Geneva by coordinating expert bodies and translating soft international norms into binding national law. (Pella, 1919, pp. XIII, 1–4)

THE INTERNATIONAL BUREAU FOR THE UNIFICATION OF CRIMINAL LAW

From the outset, the League's choice was not to build yet another institution but to rewire the ones it already had. That choice took concrete form in May 1932 at Geneva when the Fifth Committee, with V. V. Pella as rapporteur, convened seven technical organisations in criminal and penitentiary matters and secured a joint resolution to strengthen ties with existing bodies rather than create new ones (League of Nations, 1933a).

At the initiative of Vespasian V. Pella, acting as rapporteur of the Fifth Committee of the League of Nations Assembly, a meeting was convened between the seven major international technical organizations in the fields of criminal and penitentiary law (Pella, n.d.-a), to determine how the League of Nations could support the progressive unification of criminal law and the cooperation of states against crime (Pella, 1932a). It was decided that instead of creating new bodies within the League, it was preferable to strengthen ties with the existing specialised organisations (League of Nations, 1932a; League of Nations, 1932b).

Following this resolution, the IBUCL was reorganised to become the central technical coordinating body. Thus, the IBUCL became a mixed body, composed of delegates of member states and representatives of the main associations of criminal law, criminal police, and penitentiary reform (League of Nations, 1933a; International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law [IBUCL], 1937a). This reorganization was ratified by all the organizations involved and was officially recognized by the Assembly of the League of Nations in 1933, which designated the IBUCL as a consultative body (League of Nations, 1933b), which led to an increase in the number of member states, from 18 to 37 immediately after the resolution, and up to 48 by 1936 (IBUCL, 1937b; League of Nations, 1933b).

The *de facto* headquarters of the IBUCL remained where its Secretary-General, Vespasian V. Pella, resided (i.e., in Romania), which granted Romania the distinction of hosting an international institution recognised by the League of Nations Assembly (League of Nations, 1933b).

Between 1932 and 1939, the International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law was highly active, serving as a platform for the preparation of international conventions and for the harmonisation of national criminal laws (League of Nations, 1935a).

The IBUCL was responsible for organising and ensuring the continuity of international conferences for the unification of criminal law (League of Nations, 1932c). During this period, the most important were: the Conference of Madrid (1933); the 6th Conference of Copenhagen (1935), with an agenda including topics

such as political offenses, extradition, the right of reply in the press, and terrorism (League of Nations, 1935a); and the 8th Conference of Cairo (1938), which brought together delegates from 27 states and representatives of the League of Nations, and discussed subjects such as breach of trust, passport forgery, and the falsification of securities (IBUCL, 1938a).

Among the subjects on which it worked at the request of the League were: the suppression of procuring – it created a working committee and drafted a convention project, in collaboration with the League's Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children; family abandonment – it studied the issue and provided documentation to the League's Advisory Commission for Social Problems; repatriation of released foreign convicts – it elaborated principles for repatriation, especially in cases where extradition was not possible (Vespasian V. Pella Archive, III Varia 53); protection of witnesses and accused persons – in 1937, the League requested the Bureau to present concrete proposals to prevent violence and coercion during criminal investigations (League of Nations, 1937); the legal status of women – the Bureau, through its representative Henri Donnedieu de Vabres, participated in the League's study on the status of women (IBUCL, 1938b).

The model texts and resolutions adopted at the IBUCL conferences directly influenced legislative reforms in several countries (Pella, n.d.-b). Several documents explicitly mention that the new Romanian Penal Code of 1937 and the Polish Penal Code of 1932 integrated numerous provisions inspired by the Bureau's work (League of Nations, 1933a; League of Nations, 1935b).

THE INTERNATIONAL PENAL AND PENITENTIARY COMMISSION AND THE STANDARDISATION OF PRISONERS' TREATMENT

Another pivotal institution in the works on penal and penitentiary issues was the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC), which played a central and official role in the League of Nations' (LN) efforts to address criminal and penitentiary issues during 1932–1939. Its work focused on establishing international standards for the treatment of prisoners and on providing technical expertise in criminal justice reform. Vespasian V. Pella was a key figure, serving both as a member of the IPPC and as rapporteur of the LN Assembly on these topics (Pella & van der Aa, 1932a, 1932b; League of Nations, 1933b).

There was a close and institutionalised collaboration between the IPPC and the League of Nations. In the 1930s, amid growing international interest in improving prison conditions, the LN decided not to create new bodies but to rely on the expertise of already existing institutions (League of Nations, 1930; League of Nations, 1932b).

Under the coordination of Vespasian V. Pella, seven organisations, including the IPPC, met in Geneva and adopted a joint resolution (Pella, 1932b), which recommended that the LN support the progressive unification of criminal law and inter-state cooperation, but without creating new permanent bodies (League of Nations, 1932b).

A mechanism of collaboration was established through which the IPPC transmitted the results of its work (statistics, projects) to the LN Secretariat, while the Secretariat notified it of issues of interest for study (League of Nations, 1931a). Furthermore, the LN Assembly decided that the Secretary-General should present an annual report on the activities of these technical organisations, including the IPPC (League of Nations, 1932a).

The most prominent project of the IPPC was the “Ensemble de règles” (Set of Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners). It drafted a set of minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners (League of Nations, 1930), sent in 1930, by the LN Assembly to governments for comments (League of Nations, n.d.-a).

In 1931, the Assembly requested the IPPC to revise the rules based on the responses received from governments and on a memorandum from the International Labour Office (ILO) (Pella, n.d.-a; League of Nations, 1932b). In May 1932, the IPPC established a special subcommittee to carry out this revision (League of Nations, 1932d), and the revised text was finalised in 1933 (League of Nations, 1933c). One year later, the LN Assembly formally recommended these rules as a minimum standard below which no penitentiary regime should fall (League of Nations, 1935c).

This set of rules did not represent an ideal system but established the “minimum conditions” that any penitentiary regime should respect, regardless of available resources. Among the essential principles were: separation of categories of prisoners - women from men, youth from adults, pre-trial detainees from convicted prisoners; decent housing and hygiene conditions - clean, ventilated, and well-lit spaces with adequate sanitary facilities; food and medical assistance - sufficient nutrition to maintain health, access to drinking water, and regular medical checkups; work and education - work was considered mandatory for convicts but had to be instructive and ideally remunerated, with access to education and a library; freedom of religion and contact with the outside world - prisoners had to be guaranteed access to a priest or minister of their own faith and the right to correspondence and regular visits (League of Nations, 1930/1934).

The League of Nations adopted these rules as a reference point and, starting in 1934, requested governments to report annually on their implementation and on the reforms undertaken (League of Nations, 1936a).

Despite these standards, within the Fifth Committee, a series of “reprehensible practices” still existing in certain states were reported (League of Nations, 1935d). The report, presented by Vespasian V. Pella in 1935 specifically highlighted and strongly condemned these abuses. The main unacceptable practices identified were: physical or psychological violence and coercion to obtain statements or confessions, both in prisons and in police stations - a practice later reaffirmed as a major concern, with measures being studied for the protection of witnesses and defendants against torture; restrictions on religious freedom and on prisoners’ contact with a priest or representative of their faith; forced labour in conditions close to slavery, intended not for re-education but for exploitation; malnutrition and detention conditions hazardous to health; and the detention of women in facilities without adequate female supervision (League of Nations, 1935e; League of Nations, 1936a; League of Nations, n.d.-b).

Pella vehemently criticised penal systems based solely on “vindictiveness”, advocating a modern approach focused on the rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners (League of Nations, 1935d; Pella, n.d.-c). His vision, reflected in the reports he presented, promoted the scientific examination of the causes of criminality and the prisoner’s profile to individualize treatment; the professional training of penitentiary staff, who should play an educational rather than a merely custodial role; respect for fundamental human rights, including the right to defence and human dignity (League of Nations, 1935d); and the broad use of alternative measures to imprisonment, such as conditional release or suspension of sentence execution, to reduce prison overcrowding and prevent “criminal contagion” (League of Nations, n.d.-b).

In response to the abuses identified, the Fifth Committee’s 1935 resolution requested that governments not only publish and promote the “Minimum Rules” but also take concrete measures to eliminate the inhumane practices identified (League of Nations, 1936b).

The concern for the treatment of prisoners remained a constant item on the agenda of the League of Nations. Subsequent reports, presented again by Pella in 1936 and by other rapporteurs in later years, continued to monitor progress (League of Nations, 1935c; League of Nations, 1936a). It was found that numerous states, such as Italy, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia, had implemented significant reforms, sometimes exceeding the minimum standards (League of Nations, 1935c). At the same time, new areas of study emerged, such as the situation of foreign and stateless prisoners after release and the protection of witnesses and defendants against abuses during investigations (League of Nations, n.d.-b).

THE BERLIN CONGRESS (1935)

The Berlin Congress of August 1935 showed what this new technocratic momentum looked like in practice. Presiding over Section I, Pella helped translate general principles into operational resolutions - most notably the judicialisation of the post-sentencing phase through magistrates’ oversight and specialised training - so that prison administration would no longer be a purely administrative preserve.

The International Penal and Penitentiary Congress held in Berlin in August 1935 stands out as a major event in the activity of the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission and as an important milestone in the reform efforts of justice systems during the period 1932–1939. It also highlights the role played by Vespasian V. Pella within the congress, as well as the adoption of concrete resolutions that had a practical impact on how the execution of sentences was conceived.

The congress, known as the 11th International Penal and Penitentiary Congress, was organised by the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission and took place in Berlin in August 1935. One of the major topics on the agenda was a draft model extradition treaty - a technical project on which the IPPC was working at that time. This detail places the congress within the broader context of the IPPC’s efforts to unify and standardise international legal instruments, as discussed previously (League of Nations, 1935a; Vespasian V. Pella Archive, VI Varia 84).

Pella served as president of the congress’s First Section. This section brought together delegates from numerous countries, including Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia, Germany, Belgium, France, and Poland. As president, Pella coordinated the work that led to the adoption of important resolutions. He also supervised a Drafting Committee for these resolutions, which included experts from Italy, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, Iran, and another Romanian representative, Ionescu Dolj.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the congress, as highlighted by sources, a series of resolutions focused on the role of magistrates in the post-sentencing phase, reflecting a modern vision of criminal justice - one that does not end with the pronouncement of the sentence.

The resolutions recommended the involvement of judges in the execution of sentences - important decisions regarding the enforcement of custodial sentences should be entrusted to judges, prosecutors, or mixed commissions chaired by them. This suggested a shift from purely administrative control of prisons to judicial oversight.

They also supported the supervision of suspended sentences - the responsibilities of judges and prosecutors should be expanded to include the monitoring and supervision of suspended sentences. Finally, the resolutions advocated for the specialisation of magistrates, judges, and prosecutors were to receive specialised training in criminology and penitentiary sciences, with a proposal that they be allowed to visit and work temporarily in penal institutions to gain practical experience (Vespasian V. Pella Archive, VI Varia 84).

By 1938, the agenda had widened. The Fifth Committee's annual review moved from general standards to specific problem-areas - overcrowding, alternatives to detention, the fate of foreign and stateless prisoners - and, above all, to the protection of witnesses and accused persons against coercion in investigations, signalling a shift from institutional design toward rights in procedure.

In 1938, within the framework of the League of Nations Assembly, a new report was drafted that broadly addressed criminal and penitentiary issues, reflecting the state of international efforts in that year.

The report of the Fifth Committee of the League of Nations Assembly (1938) represents a synthesis of the progress and challenges in the criminal and penitentiary field at the global level. This document fits within the broader context of the efforts toward the standardisation and humanisation of criminal justice discussed during the period 1932–1939.

The report highlights an evolution from the establishment of general principles to the treatment of specific and complex issues, reflecting both the successes and the difficulties encountered in international cooperation. The document continued to monitor the application of the set of minimum rules, "Ensemble de règles", recommended by the LN Assembly in 1934. Numerous governments, including France, British India, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and Romania, reported significant penitentiary reforms, demonstrating a tendency to align with international standards.

An important finding of the report was the large number of people deprived of liberty - over 1 million prisoners in 53 countries during the period 1936–1938. To combat prison overcrowding, the report recommended the study and implementation of alternative measures to detention, already practised in countries such as Denmark and Argentina. Among these were the postponement and conversion of fines; conditional release and post-release supervision; and, respectively, the reduction of maximum custodial sentences.

A specific and complex issue was also addressed: the fate of foreign and stateless prisoners upon release from prison, to avoid their arbitrary expulsion (Vespasian V. Pella Archive, II Varia 32; League of Nations, n.d.-b). Based on the proposals from the 1938 Cairo Congress (Pella, 1939), the report requested that the League and the technical organisations prepare a joint report by mid-1939 to compile the legislative and administrative solutions adopted by states (League of Nations, n.d.-b).

A new and highly significant topic - the protection of witnesses and accused persons - reflected an evolution toward the protection of human rights in criminal proceedings. The report called for the study of protective measures against physical or psychological violence and coercion used to extract statements during interrogations. Technical organizations such as the International Association of Penal Law and the Howard League were invited to submit concrete proposals by September 1939.

INTERNATIONAL POLICE COOPERATION UNDER THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Alongside law and prisons lay the operational arm: police cooperation. The 1931 conference of Central Police Offices, drawing on the ICPC's experience, opted for adaptable administrative regulations rather than a treaty, so states could move quickly while respecting sovereignty: centralise information, standardise forms, and coordinate through national contact points without exercising executive power abroad.

The organisation of Central Police Offices in 1931 represented an essential and practical component of the broader international cooperation efforts in criminal and penitentiary matters during the period 1932–1939. The discussions highlight the shift from theoretical principles to the creation of concrete mechanisms of collaboration, especially in the fight against transnational crime, such as currency counterfeiting.

In March 1931, the First Conference of Central Police Offices had as its main objective the establishment of common rules and procedures for national central offices, aimed at making international police cooperation more effective. This initiative was a direct result of the 1929 Geneva Convention for the

Suppression of Counterfeiting Currency, which had provided for the creation of such offices (League of Nations, 1929).

A central debate concerned the form that the conference's results should take. It was discussed whether an international binding arrangement or simple recommendations should be adopted (League of Nations, 1931b). Most delegates agreed that a formal treaty would require slow and cumbersome parliamentary ratifications. Therefore, a more flexible solution was chosen: the drafting of a report to the Council of the League of Nations, to which a model draft of an administrative regulation would be annexed. This model could be implemented quickly by interested states without complex legislative procedures.

It was clearly established that these offices could not exercise executive powers on the territory of other states (such as ordering arrests or searches). Their role was to centralise and transmit information about cases of international interest and to serve as contact points for requesting cooperation from competent local authorities (League of Nations, 1931b, pp. 6–11).

It was emphasised that the internal organisation of the police varied considerably from one state to another (with federal structures such as Switzerland or Great Britain, versus centralised systems). The proposal to create a central police section with nationwide authority was considered impossible to implement uniformly (League of Nations, 1931b, pp. 1–6). The model regulation was therefore designed to be adaptable to these diverse national realities (League of Nations, 1931b, pp. 6–11).

The conference decided to create a technical subcommittee to draft standardised forms for the exchange of information on forgeries, suspects, and judicial decisions. There was also discussion of the transmission of physical evidence and the centralisation of statistics on counterfeiting (League of Nations, 1931b, pp. 12–17).

The organization of police offices became a cornerstone of a broader vision aimed at creating a “common front” of civilized states against crime - an idea strongly promoted, among others, by Pella.

During the 1931 conference, Vespasian V. Pella proposed that the discussion should not be limited to currency counterfeiting but should address police cooperation in combating all forms of international criminality. He argued that offenders specialised in one field (e.g., counterfeiting) often committed other crimes (such as fraud or theft), making an integrated approach necessary (League of Nations, n.d.-c). This vision aligned with the later efforts of the League of Nations and the technical organisations to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking (League of Nations, 1935a).

The International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC), headquartered in Vienna, was a precursor and key actor in the development of police cooperation. It had organised international congresses since 1923, established a central bureau to combat currency counterfeiting, and developed practical tools such as a telegraphic code and a radiotelegraph network (League of Nations, n.d.-d). The ICPC was one of the seven technical organisations constantly consulted by the League of Nations on criminal matters (League of Nations, 1933a), and the 1931 conference made use of its experience.

Police cooperation was seen as an essential component of the progressive unification of criminal law. Without effective mechanisms for tracking and apprehending offenders, the harmonisation of legislation would remain a theoretical exercise (Pella, n.d.-c). The organisation of central offices was thus a concrete step toward improving judicial cooperation, complementing efforts to standardise the definitions of crimes and extradition procedures.

Documents show that the fight against crime was addressed on multiple levels simultaneously. While the ICPC dealt with operational aspects, other organizations, such as the International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law (whose Secretary-General was V. V. Pella), worked on harmonizing legal texts, and the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission focused on the treatment of prisoners and penitentiary standards, all of these coordinated by the 5th Committee of the League, where Pella was rapporteur (League of Nations, 1932e).

THE ROMANIAN PENAL CODE

To look at these issues through a more localised lens, the Romanian Penal Code was a great example of the international movement for the unification of criminal law during the interwar period. The role of Vespasian V. Pella was essential in this process, as he acted both as a promoter of international principles and as an architect of their integration into national legislation (IBUCL, 1933).

The Romanian Minister of Justice, Victor Antonescu, emphasised that the draft Penal Code incorporated the resolutions adopted at the international congresses for the unification of criminal law. The Romanian Legislative Council included in the 1932 draft code numerous provisions directly inspired by the texts proposed at the international conferences for the unification of criminal law held in Warsaw (1927), Rome

(1928), Brussels (1930), and Paris (1931) (League of Nations, 1933a) and also by the legislative models developed by the International Bureau for the Unification of Criminal Law (Pella, n.d.-b).

The Romanian Penal Code of 1937 stood out for introducing avant-garde concepts and criminalizations. Some considered that it even surpassed the standards of some international conventions of the time (League of Nations, 1935b), such as by introducing into criminal law the national legal criminalisation of preparing a war of aggression (League of Nations, n.d.-e). The Code explicitly sanctioned “propaganda intended to induce Romania to declare a war of aggression.” Through this, Romania became one of the first states - alongside Poland and Brazil - to implement the recommendations of the Inter-Parliamentary Union to criminalise war propaganda (Pella, n.d.-d). Pella himself presented the Romanian code as an example in international debates as early as 1930, pointing out that it “already penalises such acts” (Joint Security Commission, 1930).

The draft code also (in its 1935 version) contained detailed provisions on sexual corruption, pimping (art. 433), and international human trafficking (art. 439), with aggravated penalties for minor victims or those in vulnerable situations. These provisions were considered very advanced for that time. The draft code also introduced, through Article 11, a principle of universal jurisdiction. This allowed the prosecution in Romania of international crimes committed abroad by foreigners (terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, etc.) in cases where extradition was refused or impossible (League of Nations, 1935b). The Code was internationally praised for its merits, such as the individualisation of punishment, ensuring the social reintegration of convicts through a special fund, and the clear definition of international crimes (IBUCL, 1933). It also eliminated legal obstacles that had prevented Romania from ratifying important international conventions. For example, Pella emphasised in 1937 that, with the entry into force of the code, Romania could proceed with the urgent ratification of the Convention for the Suppression of Counterfeiting of Currency and the Extradition Treaty with Portugal (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

FINAL REMARKS

By 1939, the League’s penal architecture had achieved more than is commonly recalled. The 1932 Geneva agreement to strengthen ties with existing expert organisations created a durable coordination regime without adding new bureaucratic layers. The IBUCL became the technical hub; the IPPC translated comparative practice into minimum standards and a reporting flow; and the ICPC and the 1931 Central Police Offices conference standardised operational cooperation. Pella’s role was catalytic: he convened, reported, drafted, and - crucially - bridged Geneva and national ministries, ensuring that model texts travelled into law.

The Romanian Penal Code of 1937 demonstrates this translation effect. Its provisions on trafficking, universal jurisdiction for certain international offences, and even propaganda for aggressive war show that interwar “soft law” could harden in statute. Meanwhile, the 1938 women’s status enquiry and the Fifth Committee’s continuing concern with abuses in detention illustrate that rights-protective themes were integral to the penal project rather than post-1945 imports.

This record does not negate the League’s geopolitical limits, but it complicates the failure story. In penal governance, the League built useful infrastructure - standards, templates, and habits of cooperation - that post-war institutions would inherit and expand. It also underscores the agency of peripheral states: Romania, through Pella and the IBUCL, was not merely a rule-taker but a rule-shaper. Recovering this history invites a broader reassessment of the League as a space where small states could do big things - by mastering committees, drafting rules, and making them stick at home.

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Ethical Approval

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Informed Consent

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